Official Histories
Second World War



Australia in the War 1939–1945
Volume 1
By Gavin Long

AUSTRALIA IN THE WAR OF 1939-1945

SERIES ONE
ARMY

VOLUME I
TO BENGHAZI

AUSTRALIA IN THE WAR OF 1939-1945

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TO BENGHAZI

by

GAVIN LONG

CANBERRA
AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

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PREFACE

In March 1943 the War Cabinet appointed the writer of this volume to prepare a plan for an official history of Australia's part in the war then being fought. This action was a result of representations by Dr C. E. W. Bean who had completed his *Official History of Australia in the War of 1914-1918* in the previous year. After advice had been sought from a number of authorities, a provisional plan was presented to the War Cabinet and approved by it in July 1943. It provided for the writing of sixteen volumes, not including those which might be devoted to a medical history to be planned by an editor nominated by the medical directors-general of the three Services; for the preparation, as a departmental responsibility and for the guidance of future administrators, of wartime histories of Federal departments, not necessarily for publication; for the establishment of a naval historical records section; and an enlargement of the air force historical records section. (An adequately staffed military history section was already at work.) Among other proposals was one that the trustees of the Canteen Fund be asked to help in providing funds towards the production of unit histories where needed.

A revised and extended plan was approved by the War Cabinet in December 1945. Under this plan, as finally amended in 1950, there will be, in the civil series of this history, two volumes on wartime government and the war's effects on the people, two on economic developments, and one on technological and scientific achievements. The volumes on wartime Government present the over-all view as seen by the War Cabinet, and to that extent they form a key to the work as a whole. The experiences of the fighting Services are described each in a separate series. It would not have been practical to write volumes which described the combined operations of all three Australian fighting Services, because they were in action together so seldom.

The history of the Australian Army from 1939 to 1945 is to be described in seven volumes, three of which deal principally with campaigns in the Middle East and four with campaigns in East Asia and the Pacific. A large part of the present volume is concerned with the period before military operations began, and to a great extent it forms an introduction to the military series as a whole. It includes only one relatively brief campaign. In the air force series two will describe the experiences of the Australian Air Force at home and in the war against Japan, and two the part which Australians played in nearly six years of air warfare in Europe and the Middle East. The two naval volumes relate the story of the world-wide activities of the Australian Navy; the first ends at a convenient date in 1942. Each of these three series is introduced by a brief account of developments between the wars. The medical history is planned in four volumes in which wartime problems of the medical profession in general and the medical services in particular are examined, and their organisation

and work described in relation to the needs of the armed Services and the health of the nation.

In all this planning Dr Bean's advice was constantly obtained. He also read the first draft of this and the succeeding volume of the army series and offered much valuable criticism.

The administration of the official war history was placed under the Minister for the Interior, largely because to his department belongs the Australian War Memorial at Canberra, which nursed the small staff of the official history in its infancy and is the home of the records of the Australian fighting Services in the first and second of the world wars of this century. In 1943 the Prime Minister, Mr. Curtin, established a committee consisting of the Leader of the Opposition, the Minister for External Affairs and himself to consult with the Minister for the Interior and the General Editor about the appointment of writers of individual volumes of the history. Thus the writers whom the General Editor chose and recommended had to have the approval of both Government and Opposition. The General Editor and the Medical Editor were salaried. The other eleven writers signed agreements with the Minister for the Interior to complete their work within a specified time—generally four years for one volume. Their fee was paid in instalments as sections of the work were delivered. Each writer was required to spend on each volume a year free of other employment, but in fact several have devoted considerably more full-time work than that to the task. The writer of the volumes on wartime government obtained a cancellation of his contract with the Commonwealth in order that he might stand for election to the House of Representatives, but, with the agreement of the Government and the Leader of the Opposition, he continued his work as a labour of love.

At its maximum the staff employed to help the writers has included seven research workers or literary assistants, a cartographer, a secretary and two part-time typists. It has been a general principle that, so far as was practicable, the researchers should not intervene between the writer and his source material. One result of this policy has been that the research and editorial staff has probably been smaller in relation to the size of the undertaking than in other organisations working in this field. A main task of this hard-working and devoted team has been to provide each writer with the greater part of his source material—a task demanding exceptional patience and initiative in view of the fact that only a proportion of it was yet in the good order and arrangement that the archivists will eventually achieve, and much still in the custody of Government departments. They have also carried out detailed research work of a strictly factual kind. However, the writers of these volumes have not been dependent to any great extent on narratives or summaries prepared by others. The research staff has prepared the typescript for the printer, prepared the biographical and other footnotes and the indexes, and done a great amount of checking.

An undertaking by the Government to give reasonable access to official documents has been generously carried out by Ministers, administrators

and archivists. The writers have been helped also by the exchange of documentary material with colleagues in the British countries, the United States and Holland. As the work progressed several volumes of British Commonwealth and American official histories and many memoirs by wartime leaders became available. These helped to fill notable gaps, particularly in enabling Australian writers to record deliberations in London, Washington and other places which affected the employment of Australian forces.

When I accepted appointment in 1943 it was on the understanding that after the war I should be free to take up the question of freedom from censorship. When the War Cabinet approved the final plan of the history in December 1945, it decided that "the exercise of censorship by the Government is to be limited to the prevention of disclosure of technical secrets of the three Services which it is necessary to preserve in the post-war period." Thus this history is official in the sense that it has been financed by the Government, that the writers have been given access to official papers, and have been conscious of the special responsibilities which rest upon writers of a national history.

While writers and editor have on occasion only reached agreement after considerable discussion, in no case was agreement impossible. That is not to say that writers and editor are devoid of opinions and sentiments and have achieved complete agreement on the multitude of problems raised by a work such as this; but that, in my opinion, each writer has gone as far as could reasonably be expected in subordinating to his responsibilities as an historian, his loyalty to his nation, to his Service, or to a political point of view. Each writer has been given opportunities to read and comment on the drafts of those other writers whose work runs parallel with his own, and, making the most of one of the advantages enjoyed by a contemporary historian, has had his whole work or parts of it read by men who participated in the events he describes.

The nature of the sources on which the civil volumes are based will be discussed in their prefaces. This volume, like others of the military series, is chiefly based on the war diaries and reports of formations and units, on some hundreds of interviews with participants obtained during the war, and on much correspondence and many interviews conducted after the war with a large number of soldiers, some of whom gave many laborious evenings to helping to solve our problems. Thus the authority for most of the statements is contained in documents now at the Australian War Memorial at Canberra. Footnotes have been kept to a minimum by citing authorities only where they are quoted verbatim or where support seemed to be needed for controversial statements. As a rule German, Italian and Japanese documents are named only when they have been published or otherwise made widely available. Each writer's notes will be handed to the Director of the War Memorial for preservation. Generally our policy is to accept the evidence of a witness close to the event in place and time in preference to one farther away. Thus a company commander's report is preferred, so far as the experiences of his company goes, to a battalion's

or a brigade's account of the same incident. All published sources of which substantial use has been made are named in footnotes, but in this as in other volumes of the military series they comprise only a small part of the source material.

In this preface I do not attempt to answer a number of interesting questions likely to arise in the minds of other workers in this and related fields of history. Later I will write a more detailed account of the problems encountered during the writing of the history as a whole and this series in particular.

In this volume and others dealing with operations in the Middle East the spelling of place names was a wearisome problem. There are several systems of transliterating Arabic and Greek words, each with its devoted adherents. As many as six different spellings of certain place names in Syria can be collected from maps and gazetteers in use in 1941 or later. In these volumes we have tried to avoid spellings which would be misleading or unduly irritating to Australian readers yet at the same time to go some distance towards following sensible methods of transliteration.

The practice employed in the previous Australian war history of providing a short biographical footnote about each person mentioned in the text has been followed in the army, navy and air series, and in a modified form in the civil series. We have tried to give his occupation before the war and the town or district which he considered to be his home. In the army and air series a biographical footnote published in a volume dealing with the war in Europe and the Middle East is repeated if the man concerned reappears in a volume dealing with the war against Japan.

In the preface to each volume the writer will state to what extent he had first-hand experience of the events which he records: I joined the I Australian Corps as a correspondent representing Australian morning newspapers in November 1940, after having been in France with the British Expeditionary Force in 1939-1940. I reported the operations in the Western Desert until late in February when my colleagues and I began to make ready to go to Greece.

I will not try to record the names of the very many soldiers from generals to privates who helped me in the writing of this volume. Some handed over valuable collections of documents and personal records; some have read all these chapters; some have read and offered helpful criticism of single chapters or special passages on which they could comment with authority. Many submitted to interviews lasting often for hours; many have taken great pains to collect and set out replies to our questions. In the writing of this volume much help was received from Brigadier H. B. Latham of the historical branch of the Cabinet Office of the United Kingdom and his staff.

In my work as general editor I owe much to the support of three Prime Ministers, Mr John Curtin, Mr J. B. Chifley and Mr R. G. Menzies. Mr Menzies and Mr Chifley were also wise and generous members of the History Committee during the periods when they were Leaders of the Opposition. Constant support was given by four successive Ministers for

the Interior, Senator J. S. Collings, Mr. H. V. Johnson, Mr. P. A. M. McBride and Mr W. S. Kent Hughes, and by two Secretaries of that department, Mr J. A. Carrodus and Mr W. A. McLaren.

In common with the other writers of volumes in the army series I have received generous cooperation from the Director of the Australian War Memorial, Lieut-Colonel J. L. Treloar, and his staff; the Secretary of the Department of Defence, Sir Frederick Shedden, and other officers of that department; the Chief of the General Staff, Lieut-General S. F. Rowell; and the Secretary of the Department of the Army, Mr F. R. Sinclair.

My principal assistant on this volume, and the next, has been Mr A. J. Sweeting. He was lent to me from the A.I.F. in 1944 when he was a young veteran of one Middle Eastern and two New Guinea campaigns and has worked on the history since then. He has been responsible for the index, the biographical footnotes, the preparation of the typescript for the printer, and much correspondence and checking. Beside him has been Mr John Balfour, his senior, who was on Dr Bean's staff from 1919 until 1942 and on mine from 1946, and has been the tutor of all the assistants who have worked on volumes of this history. All of us owe much to my secretary, Miss Mary Gilchrist, who has steered our organisation through its administrative problems and also done much of the typing when it presented special difficulties. I was lucky to have Mr Hugh Groser, both artist and draughtsman, as cartographer; more of his work will be seen in later volumes.

G.L.

Canberra,
4th July 1951.

LIST OF EVENTS

FROM 31 MARCH 1939 TO 25 MARCH 1941

Events described in this volume are printed in italics

1939	31 Mar	The British Prime Minister announces British and French guarantees to Poland
	23 Aug	Russo-German pact of non-aggression signed
	1 Sept	German army invades Poland
	3 Sept	Britain and France declare war on Germany; Australia and New Zealand declare war on Germany
	29 Sept	Russo-German treaty partitioning Poland
	30 Nov	Russia invades Finland
1940	9 Jan	*First A.I.F. contingent embarks*
	10 May	German army invades Holland and Belgium
	4 June	Embarkation from Dunkirk completed
	10 June	Italy declares war
	22 June	France signs armistice with Germany
	10 July-Nov	Battle of Britain
	13 Sept	Italian army invades Egypt
	22-23 Sept	Japanese occupy bases in Indo-China
	28 Oct	Italian army invades Greece
	11-12 Nov	Fleet Air Arm attacks Italian naval base at Taranto
	9 Dec	*Battle of Sidi Barrani begins*
	18 Dec	Hitler directs that preparations be made to attack Russia
1941	3-5 Jan	*Battle of Bardia*
	21-22 Jan	*Battle of Tobruk*
	30 Jan	*Australians enter Derna*
	6 Feb	*Australians enter Benghazi*
	18 Feb	Australian troops arrive at Singapore
	22-24 Feb	Athens conference on British aid to Greece
	11 Mar	Lend-Lease bill signed by President of United States
	21 Mar	*Australians capture Giarabub*
	25 Mar	Keren falls

CHAPTER 1

BETWEEN THE WARS

THE old Australian Imperial Force lived on in two fields. On the one hand were the returned soldiers' organisations, which set out to maintain the comradeship established on the now-distant battlefields, to obtain generous treatment for soldiers and to care for their dependants. On the other was the citizen army which, in 1921, was remodelled so that, in framework, it reproduced the A.I.F. as it had been from 1916 onwards. Most of the men of the A.I.F. said good-bye to the army without regret, but there were enough ardent spirits to provide a strong cadre of officers for the re-formed citizen force, some of them because they liked the life of the camp and the mess, and some out of a conviction that the army they trained or its successor would be called upon again.

A similar impulse towards public service, generally inspired by the fellowship of the A.I.F. and a resolve to make a new and better world, led a noticeable number of returned soldiers into politics, and at the elections in 1919 a small group of all ranks was elected to the Federal Parliament. It is doubtful whether many of these would have entered politics had it not been for the incentive which their army experience had produced and the prestige the quality of their service had given them. Unfortunately, nearly every soldier was on the same side of the new House —in Mr Hughes'[1] Nationalist party[2]—and only one in the "rump" Labour party which had fought with success against conscription for overseas service in 1916 and 1917.

It is not the task of the writer of this volume to trace even briefly the political and economic struggles of the Australian people during the period between the wars, but some knowledge of the attitude of parliaments and people towards military problems is necessary to an understanding of the world into which the Second A.I.F. was born. In 1919 the Government was dominated by W. M. Hughes, the wartime Prime Minister, and Mr Pearce[3] who for four years had been his Minister for Defence. Among new members of the right-wing parties who showed promise of rising to some eminence were Mr Bruce,[4] a business man who had served at Gallipoli and in France as an infantry officer in the British Army—he had been in England when war broke out—and Dr Earle Page,[5] a vigorous leader of the rising Country party. These men and the

[1] Rt Hon W. M. Hughes, CH. Prime Minister 1915-23; Min for External Affrs 1937-39; Attorney-General 1939-40; Min for Navy 1940-41. B. Wales, 25 Sep 1864. Died 28 Oct 1952.

[2] This title may confuse overseas readers or Australians of later generations. It was not nationalist in the sense of "separatist", but rather the reverse, nor was it a national-coalition party. Later its name was changed to "United Australia Party", and later still to "Liberal Party".

[3] Rt Hon Sir George Pearce, KCVO. Member of C'wealth Grants Commn 1939-44. B. Mount Barker, SA, 14 Jan 1870. Died 24 Jun 1952.

[4] Rt Hon Viscount Bruce, CH, MC. (1914-17: Capt, Worcester Regt and Royal Fus.) Prime Minister 1923-29; High Commnr for Aust in London 1933-45; Pres, League of Nations Council 1936. B. Melbourne, 15 Apr 1883.

[5] Rt Hon Sir Earle Page, GCMG, CH. (1st AIF: Capt AAMC.) Min for Commerce 1934-39, 1940-41; Min for Health 1937-39; Prime Minister Apr 1939. B. Grafton, NSW, 8 Aug 1880.

others of their parties, and particularly the contingent of former members of the A.I.F. now in Parliament, held with tense fervour the belief that Australia must maintain her links with Britain unbroken; and most of them that the Australian defence forces should be maintained at least at sufficient strength to preserve an efficient nucleus, and should be interlocked with those of the Empire as a whole. At the same time, like nearly all Australians of the period, they considered their country to be heavily burdened by expenditure on development and its oversea debts, and that the Australian should not be asked to spend as much upon defence as should the citizen of the United Kingdom.

The Labour party, on the other hand, had been reshaped during the war by two historic struggles which overshadowed any other conflicts the Labour movement had experienced excepting only the great strikes of 1890-94. These were the successful campaigns against conscription for overseas service and the strikes of 1917. The expulsion from the party of those members who supported conscription for foreign service had left in it a hard core of uncompromising Labour leaders in whose eyes the vital struggle of their period was that between employers and workers, and the war just ended merely a conflict between two "capitalist" groups. To some of them a khaki tunic was a symbol of "imperialism." Were not British soldiers in 1920 being employed against the newly-born socialist republic of Russia, against the nationalists of India and, closer still, against Irish patriots? About one-third of the Labour members were of Irish birth or descended from Irish settlers and, during the war, the hearts of a considerable number had been wrung by the bitter fight in Ireland which culminated in the rising of 1916.

Both groups, however, wished to find a way of preventing war, and many believed that another world war could be avoided. Although fought far from home, the war had caused Australia a loss that some considered irreparable: 59,000 of the pick of her young men, all volunteers. The conviction, born of nineteenth century optimism and philanthropy, that mankind was steadily making progress towards a kinder, happier way of life was shared without question by politicians and writers of both the Right and the Left. Might not a League of Nations preside over a peaceable and increasingly prosperous world in which such losses would not occur? That was not merely desirable, it was argued, but necessary, because another world war would mean the destruction of civilisation. Even to maintain armed Services on the scale of 1914 would be burdensome to the peoples of Europe whose energies were needed to rebuild shattered towns and restock empty storehouses. And it was laid down in Article VIII of the Covenant of the League of Nations:

> 1. The members of the League recognise that the maintenance of peace requires the reduction of national armaments to the lowest point consistent with national safety and the enforcement by common action of international obligations.

In 1920-21, the first year after demobilisation, the Hughes Government reduced the navy to a strength of about 4,500, 1,000 more than in 1914, but with twenty more vessels than it possessed in that year. The militia

numbered 100,000 compulsorily enlisted men of the 1899, 1900 and 1901 classes, practically untrained, and was equipped with the weapons which the A.I.F. had brought home. Under the *Defence Act* these men could be obliged to fight only within Australia. There was a cadre of 3,150 permanent officers and men, which was about 150 more than in 1914. Hughes pointed out that such forces would cost each Australian 12s 4d for the army and 12s 6d for the navy, compared with £2 13s 9d and £1 16s 3d in the United Kingdom.[6]

In the defence debates which followed these reductions by the Hughes Government some Labour members advocated going farther and entirely abolishing the army and navy; others argued that the Australian did not need to begin his military training until war began; "if the war proved anything," said Mr D. C. McGrath (Labour) "it proved that young Australians many of whom had not previously known one end of a rifle from another were, after training for a month or two, equal to if not superior to any other troops".[7] It was necessary for General Ryrie,[8] the Assistant Minister for Defence, who was among the few on his side who believed war to be possible within a generation, solemnly to argue the need for military training and the necessity for maintaining a cadre of skilled officers and men. "Germany", this veteran soldier said, "is only watching and waiting for the day when she can revenge herself".[9] Some Government members advocated spending the money sought for the three Services on immigration and the unification of the railways, as forms of defence.

The Ministers who brought forward the modest defence plans of 1920 and 1921 were described by some Labour members as "militarists", and "war mongers". "We must carefully guard", said the newly-elected Mr Makin[1] (Labour) "against the spreading in the body politic of the malignant cancer of militarism."[2] Mr Frank Brennan[3] (Labour) described the Minister for Defence, Mr Pearce, as "the faithful servant of the military caste he represents"[4]; and Mr A. Blakeley (Labour) denounced Hughes' Ministry as a "brass hat Government".[5] Equally strongly worded advice that expenditure on defence be reduced came from more conservative quarters. For example, a Royal Commission (Sir Robert Gibson and Messrs George H. Turton and G. G. Haldane) appointed in 1921 to consider and report on Commonwealth public expenditure (the "Federal Economy Commission") wrote: "Evidence is not lacking that there is a desire in some quarters to maintain the Military spirit and permanently

[6] *Commonwealth Debates*, Vol. 93, p. 4392.
[7] *Commonwealth Debates*, Vol. 93, p. 4922.
[8] Maj-Gen Hon Sir G. de L. Ryrie, KCMG, CB. (Comd 2 LH Bde 1914-18.) High Commnr for Aust in London 1927-32. B. Michelago, NSW, 1 Jul 1865. Died 2 Oct 1937.
[9] *Commonwealth Debates*, Vol. 92, p. 2341.
[1] Hon N. J. O. Makin. Min for Navy and Min for Munitions 1941-43; Min for Aircraft Production 1943-46. B. Petersham, NSW, 31 Mar 1889.
[2] *Commonwealth Debates*, Vol. 97, p. 12839.
[3] Hon F. Brennan. Attorney-General 1929-32. B. Sedgwick, Vic, 1880. Died 5 Nov 1950.
[4] *Commonwealth Debates*, Vol. 97, p. 11736.
[5] *Commonwealth Debates*, Vol. 97, p. 12848.

saddle the country with an expenditure on defence which would be exceedingly onerous." Sir Robert Gibson was a director of manufacturing companies and later chairman of the Commonwealth Bank Board; Mr Turton was general manager for Australasia of the Royal Insurance Company, and Mr Haldane chief accountant in the Postmaster-General's Department.

While these debates were in progress at home, Mr Hughes went abroad to the Imperial Conference of June 1921 where he pleaded eloquently for a renewal of the Anglo-Japanese alliance, provided that there was a safeguard "against even the suspicion of hostility or unfriendliness to the United States", and for a conference with the United States, Japan and France on the limitation of armaments.[6] In August the United States issued invitations to the British Empire, Japan, France and Italy to attend a disarmament conference at Washington, where, in December, the representatives of those countries agreed to reduce the number of their battleships and to restrict the size of new vessels. Ultimately the United States and the British Empire would each maintain capital ships aggregating 525,000 tons, Japan 315,000 tons, and France and Italy each 175,000 tons.[7] The treaty would remain in force until December 1936. At the same time the United States and the British Empire gave Japan an agreement which meant in effect that Britain would not create new fortifications in Asia east of Singapore, nor the United States in the central Pacific west of the Hawaiian Islands. In return Japan agreed not to fortify the Kuriles in the north, or the islands south of the Japanese mainland.

From an Australian point of view this was epochal. For 130 years the Australian continent, southern lobe of Asia, had been peacefully peopled by Englishmen and a moderate stream of other Europeans. This movement had been conducted behind the shield of British naval supremacy. But at Washington the British nations, exhausted by a global war, granted that they could no longer command the seven seas. The United States succeeded to the command of the western Atlantic and eastern Pacific, Japan to the command of the western Pacific. However, in the happy glow of internationalism that followed the war, the treaty was seen as a step towards the widespread disarmament that was to lead to a return to the relative peace of the nineteenth century.

While the Washington Conference was still in session Hughes had promised Parliament that, if the naval reductions were agreed upon, the defence vote would be substantially reduced. Consequently, in the following year, nearly half of the ships of the Australian Navy were put out of commission, and it was decided to reduce the permanent staff of the army to 1,600, to maintain the seven militia divisions (five of infantry and two of cavalry) at a strength of about 31,000 men—only 25 per cent of their war strength—and to reduce training to six days in camp and four days

[6] "Invite the United States of America, Japan and France to meet us," he said. "We cannot hope that the world will beat its sword into a ploughshare, but at any rate it can stop building more ships."

[7] In consequence the battle cruiser *Australia* was sunk outside Sydney Heads in 1924.

at the local centres a year. Seventy-two regular officers[8] out of a meagre total of some 300 would be retired, and compensated at a cost of £300,000.

In the army the sharp edge of this axe was felt most keenly by two relatively small groups. In the flush of nationalism which had followed federation there had been energetic competition to enter the military college at Duntroon, which was opened in 1911. Careful selection, thorough technical training and moulding of character by picked instructors from Great Britain, followed immediately by active service, had produced an officer corps which, though small, was of fine quality. Before and during the war of 1914-18 each young officer saw a brilliant career ahead of him, if he survived. The reductions of 1922 dashed these hopes. The young Duntroon graduates who had been majors in the A.I.F. were now peace-time captains and lieutenants at the bottom of a list so long and in a corps so small that it was unlikely that there would be any promotion for most of them for ten years at least.[9] Until then they would wear the badges of rank and use the titles attained on active service, but would be paid as subalterns and fill appointments far junior to those that many of them had held for the last two or three years in France or Palestine. Even more rigorous had been the reduction in rank of the warrant officers, some of whom had become lieut-colonels and commanded battalions in the war. They were debarred from appointment to the officer corps—the Staff Corps it was now named—entry to which was reserved to pre-war regular officers and graduates of Duntroon, and became, at the best, quartermasters, wearing without the corresponding pay and without hope of promotion the rank that they had won in the war. The result was that the community obtained its cadre of permanent officers and N.C.O's for the new army at bargain prices.[1]

Such reductions could be logically based only on an assumption either that the possibility of war was remote, or that, if it occurred, Britain could be relied upon to defend Australia. But the British Services too were drastically cut by political leaders who believed that the people demanded it; army expenditure fell from £80,000,000 in 1921-22 to £52,000,000 in 1923-24, naval expenditure from £95,000,000 to £43,000,000, air force from £13,000,000 to £9,000,000. Lieut-General Sir Harry Chauvel,[2] the Australian Inspector-General, in his first annual report after the retrenchments—one of a series of wise and penetrating examinations of Australian military problems of which, however, little notice was taken—sought reasons for Australian "complacency". He decided that it was

[8] Including twenty-five graduates of the Royal Military College, Duntroon. In addition eight cadets (five of them New Zealanders) withdrew or were discharged in 1921 and four in 1922.

[9] Among those who retired from the army soon after the reductions of 1922 were G. F. Wootten and D. A. Whitehead. Later both were outstanding commanders of the Second AIF.

[1] Officers who had graduated from the Royal Military College in 1915, for example, and who had become majors in the AIF in 1917 received only the pay of captains in the peace-time army until 1935 when they were in their early forties.

[2] Gen Sir Harry Chauvel, GCMG, KCB. Comd Desert Mtd Corps 1917-19; Inspr-Gen AMF 1919-30; CGS 1922-30; Inspr-in-Chief Vol Defence Corps 1940. Regular soldier; b. Tabulam Clarence River, NSW, 16 Apr 1865. Died 4 Mar 1945.

based on geographical isolation (which he declared to be a source of danger, not security); on a sublime faith in the power of the British Navy (though Australia had no docks to enable that navy to operate in her waters); on an impression that the Australian youth could be transformed into an efficient soldier in a few weeks (though there were six months of training before the A.I.F. went into action in 1914-15); that the 300,000 men of the A.I.F. were still available (though only 140,000 were discharged fit and one-fifth of that force had been over 31 on enlistment, six to nine years before); that the war of 1914-18 was a "war to end wars".

The belief that the war of 1914-18 had ended war was rudely shaken, however, in the spring of 1922 when, on 19th September, Mr Hughes announced in the House that the British Cabinet had decided "to resist Turkish aggression and prevent the Allies being driven out of Constantinople", and had asked whether Australia would send a contingent if necessary. Hughes (although he resented the impetuousness of this appeal) promptly announced that the Australian Cabinet had agreed to comply. The tone of the debate which followed his announcement was both sober and prophetic; hardly an echo was heard of the outbursts against "war mongers" and "the military caste" which had occurred in the defence debates a few months before. Mr Charlton,[3] the Leader of the Opposition (Labour), asked for fuller information. "Did Lloyd George appeal to the League of Nations?" he asked. "No, he sent cables to the Dominions asking them to participate in another war . . . . The best . . . any . . . public man of Australia can do is to endeavour to safeguard the world against further war."

Mr Lazzarini (Labour): "The best thing to do is to be true to Australia."

Mr Charlton: "Not only true to Australia but also true to the masses of the people throughout the world."

Mr Considine (Labour): "True to the working classes."

Mr Charlton: "The working classes embrace practically everyone . . . if the Government contemplate sending contingents abroad, I trust that they will first refer the matter to the people . . . . The people who had to suffer and bear all the consequences know what war means, and should be consulted before any further step is taken if we are to preserve our present civilisation."

Dr Page: "We (the Country party) do not believe in war but in peace with honour. If Great Britain thinks it necessary to go to war we believe that Australia, as part of the Great British Empire, should always be ready to come to her assistance."[4]

The author of this crisis was Mustapha Kemal, the same who, as a young colonel, had saved the day for the Turks at Anzac in April 1915. Now, a national leader, he had driven the Greeks from Asia Minor and was approaching the Straits at Chanak where only a few British troops (France and Italy having ordered the withdrawal of their contingents) stood between the victorious Turkish army and an invasion of Europe which might light the fires of war again. Lloyd George, greatly influenced

[3] Matthew Charlton. MHR 1910-28. B. Linton, Vic, 15 Mar 1866. Died 8 Dec 1948.

[4] *Commonwealth Debates*, Vol. 100, pp. 2352, 2354, 2355.

by his lieutenant, Winston Churchill, appealed to the Dominions for that support which France and Italy had withdrawn. In common with Australia, New Zealand had offered help, but the appeal to the Dominions had been made so precipitately as to cause a justified resentment. The crisis passed, but the lesson was clear: within three years a leader had arisen in a defeated nation, had successfully challenged one of the peace treaties, and brought the world to the brink of another large-scale war.

Next year the Government, now a coalition of the Nationalist and Country parties led by Mr Bruce and Dr Earle Page, declared that the bright hopes raised by the Washington Treaty had not been completely fulfilled and that it had sought and obtained an Imperial Conference at which problems of defence would be thrashed out. Before the delegates departed for the conference the Opposition made it clear that it was opposed on both political and strategical grounds to participation in the proposed construction of a naval base at Singapore. Mr Charlton said that he favoured aerial and submarine forces—to be used for purely local defence. Japan, he said, had given assurances that she desired to keep the peace. If Australia took any part in the establishment of a Singapore base, that would be a departure from policy, because Australia had never before agreed to assist Great Britain in defence preparations outside Australia; and she had enough to do to see to her own defence. "The Labour party's policy . . . is opposed", he said, "to the raising of forces for service outside the Commonwealth, or promise of participation in any future oversea war except by a decision of the people."[5]

"If a naval base is established at Singapore", said Senator Gardiner (Labour), "it must lead to a division of Britain's naval strength and the chances are that a weak navy will be left to defend the base without a population such as we have in Australia behind it to render any assistance."[6]

At the Imperial Conference of 1921 the members had affirmed the necessity for disarmament; at this conference two years later they agreed upon the necessity for defence, and suggested (for the conference could not decide the policies of self-governing States) guiding principles on which it should be based.[7] It was agreed that the primary responsibility of each part of the Empire was for its own defence, that adequate provision should be made for safeguarding maritime communications and for naval

[5] *Commonwealth Debates,* Vol. 104, p. 1741.

[6] *Commonwealth Debates,* Vol. 104, p. 1835.

[7] The method of collaboration between member States of the British Commonwealth was described as follows in *The United Kingdom Central Organisation for Defence* (Cmd. 6923)—"Notes on a Comparison with the Australian Machinery", 14 Nov 1936: "Admittedly the Dominions have a close interest in problems that affect the Commonwealth and Empire as a whole, but each of them has a special and distinct outlook on world affairs, dependent on its geographical position and its political and economic environment, and Dominion Governments must retain full liberty of action. Cooperation in Commonwealth Defence has therefore always taken the practical form of promoting uniformity of organisation, training, and equipment of military forces, maintaining the closest possible touch between staffs, and inter-changing officers in order to promote a common doctrine and outlook in military affairs. Collaboration in war-time between the naval, land and air forces from different parts of the Commonwealth has thus been easy and effective. Since 1923, the natural tendency of the different parts of the Commonwealth to view problems from their own individual standpoint has become more marked."

bases, that the British Navy should be equal to that of any foreign power (not equal to any two powers, as before 1914). The conference "took note" of the deep interest of Australia and New Zealand in the provision of the proposed naval base at Singapore to enable the navy to operate effectively in the East, the provision of a safe route through the Mediterranean, and the necessity in Great Britain of a home defence air force able to give adequate protection against the strongest air force within striking distance. Thus were established the principles on which Imperial and incidentally Australian defence were to be built—in framework but so securely, as it turned out, that nothing short of war could shake them. The emphasis was emphatically placed on sea and air power.[8] The principles set down by the conference, though they were the fruit of seeds of slow growth that had been planted in the previous years, were to become so notably the basis of Australian defence doctrine and controversy that it is desirable to examine them in some detail.

The decision to build Britain's eastern naval base at Singapore had not passed without criticism in Britain as well as in Australia. Colonel Repington,[9] for example, an influential and conservative British military theorist, had opposed the choice of Singapore on the grounds that it lacked an industrialised population, was insecure, lacked food supplies, suffered an enervating climate, and did not defend Australia and New Zealand; and that Sydney possessed all these qualities which Singapore lacked.

> The Dominion representatives (he wrote) are usually disposed to fall in with any naval arrangements suggested by the Admiralty, which is a very authoritative body for them. Singapore as a naval panacea has also this particular attraction for Anzac statesmen—namely, that it does not burden their budget, but is a charge on our taxpayers at home. If our sailors tell them that the Grand Fleet at Singapore covers Australia and New Zealand by virtue of some flanking virtue, then the responsibility of the Admiralty is engaged; but if the Dominion representatives take this opinion without using their brains, and there is hereafter found a fallacy in the claim, then the responsibility towards the Dominions rests with their own representatives.[1]

In the years which followed the Imperial Conference of 1923 Australian staff officers, led by Lieut-Colonel Wynter,[2] perhaps the clearest and most profound thinker the Australian Army of his generation had produced, not only unearthed "a fallacy" but examined and re-examined it. Briefly to summarise the conclusions they reached in closely-reasoned lectures and essays[3]: if war broke out in the Pacific it would be at a time when Britain

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[8] Of the four senior defence advisers who accompanied the Australian and New Zealand delegations, three (Vice-Adm A. F. Everett, Rear-Adm P. H. Hall-Thompson and Cmdre A. G. Hotham) were British naval officers on loan to those Dominions; only one, Brig-Gen T. A. Blamey, was an Australian and a soldier.

[9] Lt-Col C. a'C. Repington, CMG. Of Tamworth, Warwick, Eng; b. 29 Jan 1858. Died 25 May 1925.

[1] *Policy and Arms*, London, 1924. This criticism was echoed by Admiral Sir Percy Scott, Lt-Cdr J. M. Kenworthy and others.

[2] Lt-Gen H. D. Wynter, CB, CMG, DSO, QX6150. (1st AIF: AAG, AIF 1917-19.) GOC Northern Comd 1939-40, 9 Aust Div 1940-41, Eastern Comd 1941-42; Lt-Gen i/c Admin LHQ 1942-45. Regular soldier; of Brisbane; b. "Winterton", Burnett River, Qld, 5 Jun 1886. Died 7 Feb 1945.

[3] For example by Wynter in "The Strategical Inter-relationship of the Navy, the Army and the Air Force: An Australian View" (a lecture to the United Services Institute, Melbourne Sep 1926).

was prevented by events in Europe from detaching a sufficient force to the Pacific to defeat a first-class power; that Singapore was vulnerable to attack from the landward side; that the soundest policy for Australia would be to maintain an army capable of defending the vital south-eastern area of Australia against an invader until help arrived; and that Australia should build a fleet base in her own territory as "an alternative means of enabling the British Fleet, even if delayed in the first instance, to ultimately operate in our defence".

However, as a consequence of the 1923 conference, the Bruce-Page Government decided to buy two 10,000-ton cruisers and two submarines at a cost of some £5,000,000, whereas, over a period of five years, only £1,000,000 would be spent on additional artillery, ammunition and anti-gas equipment for the army. In these five years expenditure on the navy aggregated £20,000,000; on the army, including the munitions factories, only £10,000,000; on the air force £2,400,000. The strength of the permanent military forces remained at approximately 1,750, whereas that of the navy rose, by 1928, to more than 5,000. During this period the strength of the militia varied between 37,000 and 46,000 and it was, in the opinion of Chauvel (in his report for 1927), a nucleus which did not possess the equipment nor receive the training "essential to the effective performance of its functions". It lacked necessary arms, including tanks and anti-aircraft guns, he pointed out, and there was not a large enough rank and file with which to train leaders to replace those hitherto drawn from the old A.I.F.—a source of supply which had now dried up. In the regular officer corps of 242 officers Chauvel found that "disparity of opportunity and stagnation in promotion, with retention in subordinate positions, cannot lead to the maintenance of the active, virile and efficient staff that the service demands". The only mobile regular unit was a section of field artillery consisting of fifty-nine men with two guns.

In the long debates on the naval proposals of the Bruce-Page Government the defence policy of the Labour Opposition was defined. Whereas the Government's policy was to emphasise naval at the expense of military defence, Labour's proposal was to rely chiefly on air power and the extension of the munitions industry. The Labour policy was clearly expressed, in July 1924, by Mr Forde,[4] a recently-elected member from North Queensland, who said: "I believe that the Labour party when it forms a Government . . . will develop an air force as a means of defence and probably make it the first arm and will provide submarines and fortifications . . . and convertible factories that could be used for the manufacture of small arms and the building of aeroplanes in times of war, and of farming implements in times of peace . . . . The factories could also undertake the manufacture of motor bicycles and motor cars."[5]

However, the Labour party was to be in office for only two years and a quarter in the period between the wars, and consequently Australia's

[4] Rt Hon F. M. Forde. Min for the Army 1941-45; Prime Minister Jul 1945. B. Mitchell, Qld, 18 Jul 1890.

[5] *Commonwealth Debates*, Vol. 107, p. 2597.

defence policy was closely to follow the principles set down in 1923: these emphasised ultimate reliance on the British Navy to which Australia would contribute an independent squadron as strong as she considered she could afford, and a particular reliance on the base at Singapore,[6] from which the British fleet would operate in defence of British Far Eastern and Pacific interests. At the same time a nucleus militia, air force, and munitions industry would be maintained. No precise definition of what constituted a just contribution to British naval strength was reached. In 1925-26 (as Mr Bruce pointed out) each British citizen was paying 51s 1d for defence, each Australian only 27s 2d. But the *per capita* cost of defence in Canada (which could rely on the protection of the United States) was only 5s 10d, in New Zealand 12s 11d and in South Africa 2s 6d.[7] That Australia was paying interest on a heavy overseas debt, that she was paying more than other Dominions for defence and that she urgently needed money for developmental works were facts often quoted by members of all parties as reasons why the defence vote could not be increased nor a contribution made to the cost of Singapore, but no one appears to have sought a formula whereby the cost of the defence of the Empire as a whole could be divided fairly among the members.

Thus the army did not share largely in the comparatively small increases that were made in the defence vote each year from 1924 to 1928. In his annual reports during this period Chauvel continued to direct attention to the declining effectiveness of the militia, and also to the stout-hearted endeavours of the little permanent force and of those militia officers and men who carried on staunchly despite discouragement, and, as Chauvel emphasised, "without expectation of material reward". This was not an over-statement of the situation. Highly-trained young officers who had been majors and captains in the A.I.F. of ten years before were still serving as adjutants of militia units whose citizen members were assembled for only eight days' continuous training each year and which were at only 25 per cent of their war strength. However, the system whereby each young lieutenant spent a year with the British Army in the United Kingdom or India, and a number of more-senior officers were always overseas on exchange duty or attending courses at British schools helped to keep the officer corps from stagnation.[8] Gains in equipment were microscopic: in 1926 the army obtained its first motor vehicles—five 30-cwt lorries, one for each military district except the Sixth (Tasmania), and eight tractors for the artillery; in 1927 four light tanks arrived. Nor could the army comfort itself with the reflection that, when the need arose, it could commandeer even enough horses, because, as Chauvel pointed out, the breeding of working horses had so declined that Australia was not only losing her export trade in army horses but it was doubtful whether there

[6] This part of the plan had received a temporary setback in 1924 when the British Government suspended work on the base. It was resumed in 1926. New Zealand contributed to the cost of the base, but Australia did not, arguing that her naval squadron was an adequate contribution to British naval defence.

[7] Of the Australian's 27s 2d the navy received 17s 2d, the army 5s 2d, the air force 2s 8d and munitions supply 2s 2d.

[8] In 1927, for example, forty-three out of the total of approximately 250 were abroad for all or part of the year.

were enough suitable animals in the continent to mobilise the seven divisions. To the militia officers these circumstances were equally discouraging, and the fact that they were willing to devote their spare time to so exacting a hobby—and a keen officer had to give all his leisure to it—was evidence of uncommon enthusiasm for soldiering and, in most instances, an impelling desire to perform a public service.

There was in Australia no organised group to press for more effective military defence, nor any journal in which military and naval problems were discussed with authority. In his first report, in 1921, Chauvel had urged the re-establishment of the *Commonwealth Military Journal* which had been published from 1911 to 1915 and to which officers of permanent and citizen forces had been "cordially invited" to contribute. Nothing came of this suggestion and, with one small exception, no military journal existed in Australia between the wars. To the extent that they thus failed to establish an adequate channel of communication with the people at large, the officer corps, both professional and amateur, must share, with the political leaders and the press, the responsibility for neglect of the army. In the Staff Corps and militia were men who had something to say and knew how to say it, but their writings were to be seen in British journals, chiefly in the *Army Quarterly* which was read in Australia almost solely by officers of their own Services. Criticism was discouraged by political leaders and their attitude affected the senior officers of the Services, and seeped downwards. As far as the Staff Corps was concerned the truth was that its members' otherwise outstanding education had included no instruction in what came later to be called "public relations", and their subsequent careers travelled in a narrow professional groove. The low pay[9] helped to prevent them from taking their proper place in social life outside the army and the corps became isolated to an extent that was exceedingly inappropriate in a group which was administering a citizen army. A fully-justified resentment of the parsimonious treatment they had received from Governments developed into mistrust of the political leaders who decided the policy they had to administer, and of the press which alone could educate the public in the principles of defence. In justice it must be said that the mistrust was reciprocated. Antipathy to the professional soldier was probably even more widespread in Australia than in Britain. Upon the Englishman's (and particularly the Irishman's) traditional misgivings concerning regular armies had been superimposed, in Australia, recollections of the semi-military police force of the late Victorian period.[1] The vehement denunciation of "brass hats" by Labour members of Parliament has often found an echo in the Liberal as well as the Labour press. Peace-time military service conferred little prestige; indeed, an Australian who made the militia a hobby was likely to be

[9] For example, in 1938 lt-cols in the British Army received £1157-1204 a year and a generous pension; in the Australian Staff Corps, £701-779 a year, and inadequate superannuation.

[1] It may be significant that it was an Australian-by-adoption who invented Colonel Blimp. Mr David Low though born and educated in New Zealand developed his characteristic style as a young man on the Sydney *Bulletin* during the war of 1914-18

regarded by his acquaintances as a peculiar fellow with an eccentric taste for uniforms and the exercise of petty authority. (This prejudice was the more striking by reason of its contrast with the Australian affection for uniforms, brass bands and ritual in sport—in horse racing, for example, and particularly in surf life-saving, where an ultra-military devotion to drill was developed.)

Soldiers and soldiering were in particularly bad odour in the late 'twenties. From 1927 onwards for four or five years, a sudden revival of interest in the war that had ended ten years before produced a series of angry war novels and memoirs of which Remarque's *All Quiet on the Western Front,* Graves' *Good-bye to All That* and Arnold Zweig's *The Case of Sergeant Grischa* were among the most popular.

> The object, conscious or unconscious, of all these books (one contemporary critic wrote) is to simplify and sentimentalise the problem of war and peace until the problem disappears in a silly gesture of complacent moral superiority, and the four years of war are shown idiotically as four years of disastrous, sanguinary and futile battles in which everything was lost and nothing gained, a struggle begun for no purpose and continued for no reason.[2]

Whether this criticism was right or wrong, these books and the plays and moving pictures that accompanied them undoubtedly did much to mould the attitude of the people generally and particularly of the intelligentsia to war and soldiers, and produced rather widely a conviction that wars are always ineffectual, are brought about by military leaders and by the large engineering industries which profit by making weapons, and that if soldiers and armaments could be abolished wars would cease.

It was, however, not so much a desire for disarmament, and for the peace which was widely believed to be the sequel to disarmament, but another factor that was to produce substantial and sudden reductions in the armies and navies of the world. In October 1929 share prices in New York began to collapse; soon the entire world was suffering an acute trade depression.

It happened that a Labour Ministry took office in Australia in October 1929 for the first time since the conscription crisis of 1917, and the day after the first sudden drop on the New York Stock Exchange. Before the full effects of the distant catastrophe were apparent, the new Ministers who, harking back to an old controversy, had promised the electors that if the Labour party was returned it would abolish compulsory training, ordered (on 1st November 1929) that conscription be suspended, and cancelled all military camps arranged for the current year. At the same

[2] Jerrold, *The Lie About the War,* 1930. This episode in social history saw a revival of interest not only in "disillusioned" war books but in war generally, though books such as *All Quiet on the Western Front* achieved the greater popularity. In the years 1927-30 books about the war which had for years failed even to find a publisher became best sellers, where earlier books of equal merit and similar aim, such as A. P. Herbert's *The Secret Battle* and Frederic Manning's *Her Privates We* had been comparative failures. The fashion also embraced memoirs of old wars and standard histories such as Creasy and Josephus, which had not been reprinted for years; and books which do not fall into the group Jerrold criticised—Reitz's *Commando* and Junger's *Storm of Steel* for example, written by soldiers who had no doubts about the justice and necessity of their deeds.

time the new Prime Minister, Mr Scullin,[3] instructed the Defence Committee[4] to submit an alternative plan for an equally adequate defence. There would, he said, be no discharges of permanent staff. Accordingly the Defence Council submitted a plan, which was eventually adopted, to maintain a voluntary militia[5] of 35,000 with 7,000 senior cadets. The militiamen would undergo eight days' training in camp and eight days' home training, in the local drill halls, each year. Five infantry battalions and two light horse regiments were abolished by linking pairs of units, and the establishment of most of the remaining battalions was fixed at somewhat less than half the war strength.

In reaction Mr Roland Green[6] (Country party) who had lost a leg serving in the infantry made a bitter speech in the House of Representatives recalling that Scullin and other Labour leaders, including Messrs Makin, Holloway[7] and Blackburn,[8] had attended a Labour conference in Perth in June 1918 when a resolution was passed that if the Imperial authorities did not at once open negotiations for peace the Australian divisions be brought back to Australia, and calling on the organised workers of every country to take similar action. "As a result of that attitude", said Green, "Labour was out of office in the Commonwealth for thirteen years, largely because of the votes of the soldiers and their friends. During all that time the party nursed its hatred of the soldiers, and now it is seeking revenge."[9]

Mr Scullin was a sincere pacifist. When in the Opposition he had complained with fervour that the children were being taught to believe in the glory of war and had spoken at length in defence of his action in advocating peace in 1918. His decision to abolish compulsory training was founded on staunchly-held yet muddled moral principles; but the burden of carrying it out fell upon the same small and over-tried team of officers, both professional and amateur, who had tenaciously been maintaining the spirit and efficiency of the citizen army through nine lean years and now had even leaner ones to look forward to. They "rose to the occasion", as Chauvel wrote in his final report as Inspector-General,[1] and in the first four months of 1930 their recruiting efforts and the response of the young men, though they did not achieve the 35,000 enlistments that had been authorised, produced a new militia of 24,000, with an additional 5,300 in the volunteer senior cadets—a relic of the big, well-

[3] Rt Hon J. H. Scullin. Prime Minister 1929-32. B. 18 Sep 1876. Died 28 Jan 1953.

[4] The Defence Committee was "an advisory and consultative body . . . to provide the technical coordinating link between the Naval, Military and Air Boards and the Minister." It consisted of the Chiefs of Staff of each Service and the Secretary of the Department of Defence.

[5] Hitherto the term "citizen military forces" had been used.

[6] R. F. H. Green. (1st AIF: Lt 6 LH Regt and 6 Bn.) MHR 1922-37. B. Emmaville, NSW, 29 Oct 1885. Died 27 Apr 1947.

[7] Rt Hon E. J. Holloway. Min for Health and Social Services 1941-43; Min for Labour and National Service 1943-49. B. Hobart, Tas.

[8] M. McC. Blackburn. MHR 1934-44. B. Inglewood, Vic, 19 Nov 1880. Died 31 Mar 1944.

[9] *Commonwealth Debates*, Vol. 124, p. 1489.

[1] It had fallen to the new Government to honour the two senior soldiers of the Commonwealth—Sir Harry Chauvel and Sir John Monash—by promoting each to the full rank of general, a grade not hitherto attained by an officer of the Australian Army. The promotions took effect from 11 Nov (Armistice Day) 1929.

organised cadet force in which all boys of 14 to 17 had formerly been given elementary training.[2] The numbers increased gradually in the following year and between 1931 and 1936 the number of militiamen fluctuated between 26,000 and 29,000. This strength, however, was about 2,000 fewer than that of the volunteer forces of the States when they were amalgamated into a Commonwealth force in 1901; the permanent force too stood at about the same figure as it had twenty-nine years before. In 1901, when the population of Australia was 3,824,000, the permanent forces aggregated 1,544, the partly-paid militia and unpaid volunteers 27,400. In June 1930, when the population was 6.500,000, the permanent forces totalled 1,669, the militia 25,785.

The abolition of compulsory training had been based purely on a political doctrine; but within a few months economic necessity produced still more severe reductions in the three Services. Exports declined and revenue fell. Unemployment increased, and the new Government became enmeshed in a bitter controversy about its proposal (which it was forced to abandon) that the principle of preference to returned soldiers in Government employment be replaced by preference to unionists. Defence expenditure was reduced from £6,536,000 in 1928-29 to £3,859,000 in 1930-31.[3] Such cuts could not be made without discharging hundreds of officers and men. Five naval vessels were paid off and the establishment of the navy cut bv 700 men. The permanent military forces were reduced by discharges from 1,748 to 1,556 between 1929 and 1931, and further discharges were saved only by requiring officers and men to take up to eight weeks' annual leave without pay—an adversity which, the soldiers declared, the Ministers would not have dared to inflict upon the more

[2] In the "citizen forces" of 1929, of 47,564 officers and men, 6,914 had already been volunteers. These comprised all ranks in the cavalry and the officers and a sprinkling of NCOs in the other arms. (The cavalry was raised chiefly in country districts where compulsory training did not apply.)

[3] The following tables show the strength of and the expenditure on the armed forces on the eve of the 1914 war, before the reductions of 1922, before the trade depression and at the end of 1938:

STRENGTH OF THE AUSTRALIAN ARMED FORCES

Year	Army		Navy		Air	
	Perm.	Citizen Soldiers	Perm.	Reserves	Perm.	Citizen Air Force
1914	2,989	42,261	3,486	5,113	—	—
1922	3,179	124,489	3,972	3,809	—	—
1928	1,748	42,887	5,093	6,176	970	339
1932	1,536	28,285	3,117	5,446	890	308
1938	2,795	42,895	4,986	4,315	3,104	552

Expenditure on Defence (in £000).

Year	Naval	Naval Constn.	Military	Air Force	Munitions Supply	Arms, Armament, Aircraft Equipt. etc.	Total (b)
1913-14	1,006	—	1,539	—	—	—	—
1921-22	2.276	336	1,460	147 (a)	—	—	—
1927-28	2,598	2,061	1,494	517	462	—	7,386
1931-32	1,444	3	995	326	234	—	3,185
1938-39	3,060	1,643	3,473	1,408	1,675	2,581	14,000

(a) Including Civil Aviation.
(b) Including certain other charges.

vocal civilian public service. The number of cadets in training at the Royal Military College at Duntroon was diminished from an average of sixty in the late 1920s to barely thirty in 1931, the buildings at Duntroon were closed and the College removed to Victoria Barracks in Sydney. A number of regular officers resigned; others transferred to the British or Indian Armies.

Added justification for the starvation of the fighting Services appeared to be given by the agreement at the London Naval Conference of 1930 whereby the navies of the principal powers were further reduced and the size of ships in several categories were further limited, and by progress towards a wider disarmament. At the Imperial Conference in 1930 there were no plenary discussions of defence. Mr Ramsay MacDonald who led the United Kingdom delegation had been a pacifist in 1914-18 and was a leader in the international movement towards disarmament. The three Australian ministers who attended (Messrs Scullin, Frank Brennan and Parker Moloney) were among those who had spoken most vigorously against participation in the war of 1914-18 and against Australian defence measures.

However, before the world had emerged from the depression, signs of danger of war appeared in Asia and Europe. Towards the end of 1931 Japan had begun to occupy Manchuria, and, in the following year, after having refused to accept the effort of the international committee to settle the dispute, declared that she would resign from the League. Nevertheless most leaders were content to regard this episode as too remote and the factors too complex to demand extreme action, or even to justify anxiety. But in 1933 events in Europe finally destroyed immediate hope of achieving disarmament and establishing the rule of law among the nations. In January of that year power had been seized in Germany by Hitler's National-Socialist oligarchy whose program included winning back Germany's lost territories and smashing any other military power that existed or might exist in Europe. In October Germany withdrew from the Disarmament Conference and the League of Nations. Before this critical year was over, the need for repairing the armed Services was being canvassed by politicians and publicists in Australia. Brig-General McNicoll,[4] one of a group of soldiers, professional and citizen, who had been elected to the Federal Parliament in 1931,[5] when the Labour party was defeated, declared that "a wave of enthusiasm . . . has passed over Australia about the need for effective defence".[6] This was perhaps an exaggeration, but nevertheless, there was undoubtedly evidence of some alarm and of an increasing discussion of foreign affairs and their significance to Australia.

[4] Brig-Gen Sir Walter McNicoll, KBE, CB, CMG, DSO. (1st AIF: CO 6 Bn; Comd 10 Inf Bde 1916-18.) Administrator of New Guinea 1934-43. B. South Melbourne, 27 May 1877. Died 26 Dec 1947.

[5] Others were Col E. F. Harrison and Maj A. W. Hutchin, both former regular officers and graduates of the staff college, and R. G. Casey. The debates on defence in 1931-36 were the best such discussions the Federal Parliament had heard, particularly in the later years when Labour leaders also began to make an intellectual rather than an emotional approach to defence problems.

[6] *Commonwealth Debates*, Vol. 142, p. 4257.

However, Mr Makin, still a believer that by reducing armies one could ensure peace, was able in the House of Representatives in November 1933 to quote leaders as diverse as Professor Stephen Roberts, Bishop Thomas of Adelaide, Sir Thomas Henley (a conspicuous leader of patriotic movements) and the Reverend J. W. Burton (a distinguished Methodist) as having deplored "the alarm of the last two months". "The best way to secure peace is to get rid of some of the 'brass hats'," interjected Mr Ward,[7] a young Labour member. "The dismissal of the military junta would no doubt assist in that direction," added Makin.[8] In the excitement of debate members may make comments which they do not wish to be taken literally, but that point may not be apparent to those at whom the comments are aimed—in this case the senior soldiers.

The response of the Government of Mr. Lyons,[1] who led the United Australia party, successor to the Nationalist party, to the increasingly apparent need to strengthen the fighting Services was cautious. The scars left by the depression had not healed and the Government considered that its first responsibility was to bring about economic recovery. Between 1933 and 1935 the defence vote was increased only gradually until, at the end of that period, it had almost reached the figure of 1928. The question what principles were to guide the expenditure of this slowly increasing vote and the larger sums that seemed likely to follow assumed a greater importance than in the late 'twenties because the need now seemed more urgent. The difference between the military policies of the two groups in Federal politics had it roots deep in their history and doctrines. A penetrating statement of this variance was made in the House towards the end of the period now under review by Mr. Blackburn, a clear-sighted and sometimes heterodox leader of Labour thought. "On this issue (he said) the difference between the policy of the supporters of the Government and of the members of the Labour party appears to be this: The defence policy of the Government and of its supporters is to be planned and operated in cooperation with Great Britain and other members of the British Commonwealth of Nations; that is to say it is to fit into the mosaic of a general Imperial scheme to be directed by the Imperial authorities, the Australian authorities merely doing their part in effectuating the general scheme. On the other hand the Labour party, and the Labour movement generally, believe that the defence policy of this country should be one which has regard to the possibility of Australia being attacked and should be designed solely for the purpose of warding off an attack. That is to say, the Australian Labour Party's scheme of defence does not fit into the Imperial or British scheme of defence at all, whereas the Commonwealth Government's scheme does."[2] He recalled that at the

[7] Hon E. J. Ward, Min for Labour and National Service 1941-43, for Transport and External Terr 1943-49. B. Sydney, 1899.

[8] *Commonwealth Debates*, Vol. 142, p. 4708.

[1] Rt Hon J. A. Lyons, CH. Premier of Tas 1923-28; Prime Minister 1932-39. B. Stanley, Tas, 15 Sep 1879. Died 2 Apr 1939.

[2] *Commonwealth Debates*, Vol. 155, pp. 665-6.

Perth conference of the Labour party in 1918 a special provision had been included in the party's platform to provide that action overseas could be taken only with the consent of the Australian people.[3]

Labour's policy, in the words of one of its critics, was "to confine the fighting forces to formations whose object is purely local defence against invasion by means of submarines and aircraft; and to military forces upon a national service basis whose liability for service does not extend outside the territory of the Dominion".[4] The policy of the Government party, on the other hand, had been expressed, at least since the Imperial Conference of 1923, in a concentration on naval rather than military defence, and in periodical statements that it adhered first and foremost to the principle of Imperial cooperation.

The Government had in fact, throughout these years, adopted its policy, ready-made and with little amendment, from the Committee of Imperial Defence. A weakness of this body was that, although it included the British ministers likely to be concerned with the framing of war policy, and the Chiefs of Staff of the British fighting Services, and had an extremely competent secretariat led by Sir Maurice Hankey,[5] it contained no permanent representatives of the Dominions. Such representatives might be summoned to advise on business that closely affected their governments, and would attend during Imperial conferences; the department of the Australian Chief of the General Staff was entitled "Australian Section, Imperial General Staff"; exchange of senior officers in all Services, and the attendance of Dominions' officers at the English staff colleges and the Imperial Defence College somewhat strengthened liaison and encouraged discussion of higher policy. But, if Australian and New Zealand officers at those colleges frequently expressed disagreement with British military policy towards the problem of Japan, for example, that fact was not likely to affect the plans of the Committee of Imperial Defence, whose permanent members, secretary, four assistant secretaries (one from each Service and one from India) were servants of the United Kingdom Government. The committee carried out continuously the study of Imperial war problems, but without an influential contribution from the Dominions. It shaped a military policy which carried great weight with Dominion ministers; yet in the eyes of Dominion soldiers the committee could justly be regarded as a somewhat parochial group, since it was possible that none of its members had ever been in a Dominion or in the Far East. At the worst such a method of forming military policy could lead to errors due to ignorance of conditions in remoter theatres; at the best it was a waste of leaders to draw all of them in the central offices of the British Commonwealth from

[3] *Commonwealth Debates*, Vol. 155, p. 666. Among the delegates to this conference who were, in 1938, members of the Federal Parliament were Messrs E. J. Holloway, J. H. Scullin, M. McC. Blackburn, N. J. O. Makin, D. Cameron, and J. Curtin. E. Scott, *Official History of Australia in the War of 1914-18*, Vol. XI (1936) p. 465.

[4] Admiral Sir H. W. Richmond, *Army Quarterly*, Jul 1932.

[5] Lord Hankey, GCB, GCMG, GCVO. Sec Committee of Imperial Defence 1912-38 and Cabinet 1919-38. B. Biarritz, France, 1 Apr 1877. Son of R. A. Hankey of South Aust and Brighton Eng. (Sir Maurice Hankey visited Australia and the other Dominions in 1934 and discussed rearmament plans with Ministers and senior officers of the Services. "Every Dominion from the time of my visit expedited its rearmament", he wrote later.)

the forty-six millions of the United Kingdom and none from the twenty-two millions of the oversea Dominions.

In 1925 a gifted young Australian, Major Selby,[6] advocated the establishment of a genuinely Imperial General Staff including senior representatives of the Dominions, which, although possessing no executive authority in peace, would, on the outbreak of war, take control of the British Commonwealth forces under the authority of an Imperial War Cabinet.[7] The Gallipoli campaign was then only ten years old. It involved, Selby wrote, "an expenditure of life and material out of proportion to the results achieved, and the burden of this loss fell partly upon two Dominions whose Governments were not in a position to influence effectively the course of events." If such a plan was to be achieved it was likely to come about only at the urging of a Dominion, and particularly of Australia, which was the least secure of the Dominions; it was improbable that the British Government would seek to reduce its authority in strategical matters. On the other hand the sharing of a general staff implied a sharing of responsibility, which the Dominions were unwilling to accept without reservations. At the Imperial Conference of 1937, for example, the Australian delegation, when bringing forward a proposal for the preparation by the Committee of Imperial Defence (with Dominion representatives present) of plans for cooperation between the parts of the Empire, emphasised that there could be no commitment without the approval of the Governments concerned.

Within Australia an outcome of dependence on advice from London and the consequent failure to develop a home-grown defence plan was that successive ministers failed also to work out a policy which, while integrated with the plans of the British Commonwealth as a whole, reconciled the differing viewpoints of the army and the navy. Always the ministers' aim seemed to be to make a compromise division of the allotted defence fund (invariably too small to be effective) among three competing services.

Both Government and Labour defence theories were strongly criticised. The Government policy was attacked by some Government supporters as well as by the Labour Opposition on the ground that it disregarded that the British Navy did not, and could not (while the naval treaties lasted) spare a sufficient force to command Eastern seas, that Britain lacked military and air power even to defend her own bases in the East, and therefore that Australia should take what measures she could to defend herself. Labour's policy was denounced because it left out of account that Australia's fate could and probably would be decided in distant seas or on distant battlefields. Gradually those members of the Labour party who had begun to inform themselves upon defence problems discovered that leaders of Australian military thought were able to go part

[6] Maj-Gen A. R. Selby, CB, CBE. (1st AIF: Lt 11 Bn.) BGS Brit Tps Egypt 1939-40; Comd Matruh fortress 1940-41; A/C-in-C Persia & Iraq Comd 1943-44. Regular soldier; b. Armidale, NSW, 16 Mar 1893.

[7] Maj A. R. Selby, "The Association of the Dominions in the Direction of War" (*Army Quarterly*, Oct 1925).



Militiamen using civilian transport during exercises at Port Stephens, N.S.W., in October 1938.



(Sydney Morning Herald photos)

Drawing rations at a field kitchen during the Port Stephens exercise, 7th October 1938.



(Sydney Morning Herald photo)

An 18-pounder of the 1st Field Brigade firing during the exercise at Port Stephens.

of the way with them. In their ten-years-old argument against Admiralty doctrines and particularly against the Singapore thesis the army leaders had adopted a position not far remote from that which the Labour party was reaching. Thus, when Admiral Richmond,[8] the senior British naval theorist of his day, attacked, in the British *Army Quarterly,* a theory of Australian defence that resembled the Labour party's in some respects, his argument was countered (in the same journal) by Colonel Lavarack,[1] then Commandant of the Royal Military College, Duntroon. And when, in 1936, a lecture which had been given to a small group of officers sixteen months before by Colonel Wynter, the Director of Military Training, came into the hand of Mr Curtin,[2] leader of the Parliamentary Labour Party, he read it, without betraying its authorship, as a speech in the House, presumably as an expression of the policy of his party.[3] When Sir Archdale Parkhill,[4] the Minister for Defence, who rose next, had finished speaking, Mr Brennan said: "I think that I can congratulate the Minister for Defence upon the very excellent manner in which he read the speech that had been prepared for him by the bunch of militarist imperialists whose business it is to discharge that function."

Mr Parkhill: "The honourable member might with more justification, pass that comment upon the speech of his leader."

Mr Brennan (still not on the right wave-length) ". . . our association with the British Navy is entirely an evil one . . . . I stand today exactly as I stood twenty years ago."[5] It was undeniable that Mr Brennan had not changed his position; but the leaders of his party now stood on other ground.

This incident led to an episode which is recorded here because it and another similar occurrence in the same year added greatly to the resentment felt by the regular officer corps towards the right-wing political leaders. The copy of Wynter's lecture, which contained substantially the same argument as he had published in an English journal ten years before, had been handed to Curtin by a member of the Government party who, like others of that party, was critical of the Government's defence policy. Four months later Wynter was transferred to a very junior post. One month after Wynter's demotion Lieut-Colonel Beavis,[6] a highly-qualified equipment officer with long training and experience in England, who had been chosen to advise on and coordinate plans for manufacturing

[8] Admiral Sir Herbert Richmond, KCB, RN; Comdt Imp Def Coll 1927-28; Prof of Naval and Imp History, Cambridge 1934-36; Master of Downing Coll, Cambridge 1936-46. B. 15 Sep 1871. Died 15 Dec 1946.

[1] Lavarack, "The Defence of the British Empire, with Special Reference to the Far East and Australia", *Army Quarterly,* Jan 1933. (Lt-Gen Sir John Lavarack, KCMG, KBE, CB, DSO, VX20310. 1st AIF: GSO1 4 Aust Div 1917-19. CGS Aust 1935-39; GOC Southern Comd 1939-40, 7 Aust Div 1940-41, I Aust Corps 1941-42, First Aust Army 1942-44. Governor of Qld 1946-57. Regular soldier; of Melbourne; b. Brisbane, 19 Dec 1885. Died 4 Dec 1957.)

[2] Rt Hon J. Curtin. Prime Minister and Min for Defence 1941-45. Of Cottesloe, WA; b. Creswick, Vic, 8 Jan 1885. Died 5 Jul 1945.

[3] *Commonwealth Debates,* Vol. 152, pp. 1547-1554.

[4] Hon Sir Archdale Parkhill, KCMG. Min for Defence 1934-37. B. Paddington, NSW, 27 Aug 1879. Died 3 Oct 1947.

[5] *Commonwealth Debates,* Vol. 152, pp. 1561, 1564-5.

[6] Maj-Gen L. E. Beavis, CB, CBE, DSO, VX12396. (1st AIF: CO 53 Bty AFA 1917-18.) Dir Ord Services AIF in ME 1940-42; MGO LHQ 1942-47. Regular soldier; of Melbourne; b. Bathurst, NSW, 25 Jan 1895.

arms and equipment in Australia was similarly transferred to a relatively junior post after differences of opinion with a senior departmental official?[7]

Not only was a Labour defence policy taking positive shape, but, from 1935 onwards, discussion of defence was becoming a topic of major interest in the newspapers and reviews. More books and pamphlets on the subject were published between 1935 and 1939 than during the previous thirty-four years of the Commonwealth. It was a statement in an eloquent book on defence by Mr Hughes[8] to the effect that economic sanctions meant war which so embarrassed his leader, Mr Lyons, during the debate on the Abyssinian crisis, that Hughes was compelled to resign from the Cabinet; in the back benches, however, Hughes continued to play a part similar to Winston Churchill's in the House of Commons, warning the nation that war was approaching and it should arm without delay. Expenditure on defence was slightly increased year by year, but the note of apology for only limited achievement in the explanatory speeches, particularly of Parkhill, was an indication of the Government's awareness that there was a growing public opinion in favour of more rapid progress. In 1935, when explaining the details of a three-year plan of re-equipment Parkhill explained that "the priorities laid down by the Government could not be accelerated to any degree", contending that the equipment ordered from overseas could not be obtained sooner. It was true that by giving priority to coast defences, the purchase of cruisers and the expansion of operational air squadrons the Government had, to an extent, created bottlenecks, because all these depended on oversea purchases at a time when the demand on British workshops was increasing and deliveries likely to be delayed.

For the army the three-year plan (for the years 1934-35 to 1936-37) included the purchase of motor vehicles on a limited scale, increased stocks of ammunition, and "an instalment of modern technical equipment" a phrase whose modesty was justified, because the £127,743 that was allotted to the army for its development program in the first year and the £1,005,792 for the second was merely a token in view of the fact that the army was and always had been incompletely equipped by 1918 standards. It could not mobilise even a brigade without commandeering civil vehicles, and now had to base its plans on the assumption that it would be engaged, if war came, against armies (such as the German) whose weapons belonged to a new epoch.

The keen discussion of defence in the four years to 1939 was only one aspect of that unprecedented interest within Australia in the affairs of the outside world which in its turn was a response to the alarming march of events in Europe and east Asia. In the west Hitler's Germany re-introduced

[7] For Beavis' surveys see D. P. Mellor, *The Role of Science and Industry*. Soon after the election of Oct 1937, in which Parkhill was defeated, Wynter was recalled to establish and control the new Command and Staff School, and Beavis was brought back to a post at Army HQ, where eventually he was to become Master-General of the Ordnance.

[8] *Australia and War Today* (1935) p. 95.

conscription in March 1935, and next year the Italian attack on Ethiopia revealed the impotence of the League of Nations. "We are faced," Churchill had said in comment upon Germany's open breach of the Peace Treaty, "not with the prospect of a new war, but with something very like the possibility of a resumption of the war which ended in November 1918,"[9] and this and later warnings were echoed increasingly by a minority of political leaders and publicists both of the Right and the Left throughout the British Commonwealth.

In Australia during these four years the foundations of Government (United Australia Party) defence policy remained unshaken. They were still those principles which had been defined at the Imperial Conference of 1923 and were confirmed at a new Imperial Conference in 1937.

> The basis of Australian defence policy (said the Australian report on the 1937 conference) was described as participation in Empire naval defence for the protection of sea-borne trade, as a deterrent to invasion and as a general measure of defence against raids, combined with local defence to provide a further deterrent to and a defence against invasion and raids. The great importance from the Australian point of view of the Singapore base was noticed . . . the guiding principles of the Imperial Conferences of 1923 and 1926 had been adopted by . . . Australia as the basis of its policy . . .[1]

Those Australian soldiers who had urged greater expenditure of men and money on the army had based their argument chiefly on the vulnerability of Singapore, the unlikelihood of a fleet being there at the critical time and the existence of a period, perhaps a long one, during which Australia would have to depend principally on her army. In the course of a comprehensive strategical review that was presented to the Imperial Conference of 1937 the British Chiefs of Staff[2] made suggestions which implied that there was another reason why the Dominions should maintain forces ready for immediate action. They pointed out that the earliest phase of a war against Germany or a world war would be the most dangerous to Britain and, therefore, to the Empire as a whole. Consequently help given by the Dominions in the early phase would be more valuable than the same help six months later. "However willing any Member of the British Commonwealth . . . may be to throw its weight into the war, her contribution during this earlier phase will be dependent upon the preparatory measures . . . taken in time of peace." In military terms this meant that divisions ready to serve in the main theatre as soon as war broke out would be worth far more than an offer to raise, train and arm divisions to take part in operations after the expected crisis had passed —a platitude, were it not that the Dominions lacked equipped and trained military formations. "We believe," concluded the Chiefs of Staff, "that the greatest service in the cause of peace which the Members . . . can give . . . is to demonstrate to the world a determination to rearm and a readiness to defend their vital interests."

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[9] *House of Commons Debates*, Vol. 299, p. 1062.

[1] Imperial Conference 1937. *Summary of Proceedings*, p. 12.

[2] They were Admiral of the Fleet Sir Ernle Chatfield, Air Chief Marshal Sir Edward Ellington and Field Marshal Sir Cyril Deverell.

However, the Admiralty presented to the conference an appendix to this general review which contained the words so comforting to Australian eyes that they may well have dulled the effect of the exhortation issued by the three Chiefs of Staff:

> A Japanese overseas expedition aimed at Australia, New Zealand or India may consequently be said to be a highly improbable undertaking so long as our position at Singapore is secure, and the Fleets of the British Commonwealth of Nations are maintained at such a strength as to enable a force capable of containing the Japanese Fleet to be dispatched to the Far East, should the occasion arise.

But it will be recalled that critics of reliance on the Singapore base as the hub of Imperial defence in the East maintained that Britain's position at Singapore was not secure and that an adequate fleet would probably not be available in a crisis; some contended that, in any event, the base was too distant from the possible Japanese line of advance to the south.

The Australian delegates reported to the conference that the main features of her immediate defence plans were the acquisition of a new cruiser and two sloops, rearmament of the coast defences, an increase in the air force to a first-line strength of ninety-six machines and a survey of civil industry to discover to what extent it could supplement the output of the Government munition factories.[3] After the conference Australian military preparations continued in the same direction and at much the same pace as before. Nevertheless the army leaders now pressed for accelerated expenditure on the equipment of the field army, even if it meant rearming the coast defences more slowly, arguing that coast defences might be taken in the rear if the field army was not converted into an effective force.

Criticism of the established defence policy was now being offered not only by Labour leaders who brought forward their traditional arguments, but by an increasing volume of more or less technical writing about the probable nature of the coming war in the Pacific. In Britain there was again a group of naval theorists who dissented from the doctrine that the maintenance of the Singapore base was an adequate protection of British interests in the Far East, arguing that an adequate fleet would not be there at the critical time. At the same time, in some carefully reasoned studies of the likely course of a war between Japan and the United States, the conclusion was reached that, in the opening phase, the United States would lose the Philippines and Guam, and her subsequent offensive against Japan would take the form of a gradual advance across the Pacific from the east capturing and consolidating island bases as she moved forward.[4]

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[3] For a detailed account of the inquiries and proposals which the Australian delegation carried to this conference see P. Hasluck, *The Government and the People 1939-41.*

[4] "Japanese and American Naval Power in the Pacific" by Hector C. Bywater, *Pacific Affairs,* June 1935. *War in the Pacific* by S. Denlinger and C. G. Gary, New York, 1936. A statement of the same thesis from an Australian point of view, based largely on Wynter, was given in *Japan and the Defence of Australia,* by "Albatross" (E. L. Piesse), Melbourne 1935. "Australian Defence Policy" in *The Round Table,* Dec 1935, is of equal importance. The most elaborate published study of the problem was *Demand for Defence* by W. C. Wentworth, Sydney 1939, in which the author advocated an elaborate defence plan which was to cost £150,000,000 a year for the first three years. (A copy of a Japanese translation of this 168-page work was captured on Bougainville in 1944.)

The acceptance of such opinions by Australians entailed preparing a more substantial local defence than one which would ensure them merely against raids and providing a far larger contribution to the Imperial navy (whose total strength, limited by treaty, Australia had hitherto been unable to increase).

As the threat of war became more apparent so the Labour party, under Curtin's leadership, based its defence policy, at the technical level, more and more definitely on the doctrines of those military and naval critics who contended that Australia first and foremost must prepare defence against invasion during a critical period when she might be isolated from Britain and the United States. Such a policy was easy to fit in with Labour's traditional opposition to conscription, to the dispatch of volunteer forces overseas, and with Labour's desire to increase the scope of Australian secondary industry. Labour speakers continued to place emphasis on aircraft, torpedo craft, and the manufacture of munitions to equip a citizen army limited to service in Australia. The Government leaders stood firm by the decisions of 1923—a "fair contribution" to an "essentially naval" scheme of Imperial defence.

> Whilst (Parkhill had said in 1936) the old Colonial idea of Empire defence as one of complacent trust in the Royal Navy, and nothing more, has been replaced by a conception of the defence of the common interests of a family of sovereign nations, the backbone of the defence of the British Commonwealth is still essentially naval, and will remain so as long as oceans link the shores of its members . . . . It is accordingly the policy of the Government to maintain the Royal Australian Navy at a strength which is a fair contribution to Empire Naval Defence.[5]

The Government's conception of what constituted a fair contribution in 1935-36, the year of the Ethiopian campaign and of civil war in Spain, may be gauged by the fact that the estimated expenditure on defence was then £7,583,822, which was the largest in any year since the war. In the next year, however, the year of the renewed war in China and the capture of Austria, the figure rose to £8,829,655. In 1938 (when taxation was increased for the first time since 1932) the Treasurer, Mr Casey,[6] was able to say:

> With reference to defence I can assure you that there has been no stinting of money here in Australia. Three years ago we were spending five or six million pounds a year; two years ago we were spending eight million pounds; and this year we are spending eleven and a half million pounds . . . . Defence is the only department of the Commonwealth Government that, from the financial point of view, has been able to "write its own ticket." Any money defence wants it can get, and I can assure you that this situation will remain.[7]

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[5] *Commonwealth Debates*, Vol. 152, pp. 1541, 1544.

[6] Rt Hon Lord Casey, CH, DSO, MC. (1st AIF: GSO2 Aust Corps.) Treas 1935-39; Min i/c Develop and Scientific and Industrial Research 1937-39; Min for Supply and Develop 1939-40. U.K. Minister of State in Middle East 1942-43. Governor of Bengal 1944-46. Of Melbourne; b. Brisbane; 29 Aug 1890.

[7] Ch 2, *Australia's Foreign Policy* (edited by W. G. K. Duncan), 1938. In a circular published by the Bank of NSW in Sep 1938 it was estimated that in 1937 the United Kingdom had spent 5 per cent. of the national income on defence, Australia 2 per cent, the United States 1.5 per cent, but Germany 15 per cent.

How had the army in particular fared after 1935 when, for the first time since the depression, its annual income was raised to approximately the sum that it had received in the 'twenties? At the beginning of this period of recuperation a relatively young officer, Colonel Lavarack, was promoted over the heads of a number of his colleagues and made Chief of the General Staff. The army whose rebuilding he had to control consisted of 1,800 "permanent" officers and other ranks, compared with 3,000 in 1914, and 27,000 militiamen compared with 42,000 in 1914. Its equipment had been supplemented hardly at all since the A.I.F. had brought it home from France and Palestine; and it was the equipment only of the seven divisions, but not equipment for the many supporting units that are needed for an army based on seven divisions—such units had been provided in the war of 1914-18 by the British Army. It lacked also mortars and anti-tank and anti-aircraft guns; it lacked tanks, armoured cars, and a variety of engineer and signal gear; it had inadequate reserves of ammunition. In recommending how the moderately-increased army vote be spent Lavarack's policy did not differ materially from that laid down fifteen years before by the Senior Officers' Conference of 1920; broadly it was: training of commanders and staff first, equipment next, and, lastly, the training (or semi-training, for that is all it could be) of more militiamen. The allotment of priorities was assisted by a plan under which three degrees of mobilisation were contemplated. The first was designed to meet war with a distant enemy and would entail only the manning of coast defences and the calling-up of a few militia units. The second was to meet a situation in which raids were possible but full-dress invasion improbable, and would require the assembly of a field army of two divisions and seven independent brigades of cavalry and infantry. The third—full mobilisation—would bring into the field the five infantry and two cavalry divisions, 200,000 men in all not allowing for reinforcements. To produce such a force would demand an exacting national effort; on the purely military level it would be necessary, for example, for each brigade of three nucleus battalions not only to bring itself to full strength but to produce a fourth battalion. (The army at that time was still planning on a basis of four-battalion brigades.) The leaders were thus faced with the problem of making plans for a full mobilisation which would entail, to pursue our example, expanding each so-called brigade of perhaps 900 partly-trained, poorly-equipped militia, without transport, into a full brigade of some 3,600 equipped and mobile infantrymen.

The adoption of these three degrees of mobilisation served incidentally to give the staff an ascending series of objectives. The first priority was still given to the rearmament of the out-dated coast defences of Sydney, Newcastle and Brisbane on the east coast, and Fremantle on the west.

The aims of the army (said a newspaper article based on interviews with Lavarack and some of his staff) are to concentrate first on acquiring the best new equipment, so that the Australian soldier will be armed at least as well as any attacker; at the same time to prepare for the rapid mechanisation of a large army by constant experimenting in the improvisation of military from commercial

vehicles; to maintain and improve the efficiency of the nucleus of permanent staff officers and instructors on the one hand, and of militia leaders and specialists on the other; to place along the coast near the great industrial centres coastal batteries against which no naval force would venture.[8]

Plans for full mobilisation were based on the assumption that the enemy (Japan) would attack at a time when Australia was isolated from British or American naval aid and would seek a quick decision. The enemy, using carrier-borne aircraft, would, it was assumed, first attempt to destroy the defending air force and to impose a blockade. He would then occupy an advanced naval and air base somewhere outside the relatively well-defended Newcastle-Sydney-Port Kembla area. When his main force was ready he could move overland from this advanced base, whence his force would receive the protection of land-based aircraft, or he could make a new landing farther south.[9] The Australian mobilisation plans provided for the concentration of the greater part of the army in the vital Newcastle-Port Kembla area; the army could not be strong everywhere.

It was seen that the accomplishment of even such a modest plan of military defence would take years to achieve despite the larger funds that the Government was then allotting. The sum of £1,811,000 was spent on the army in 1935-36, £2,232,000 in 1936-37, £2,182,000 in 1937-38; but one battery of 9.2-inch coast defence guns with its essential equipment cost £300,000, a battery of anti-aircraft guns with its gear and ammunition cost £150,000. In fact, until the crises of 1938, the army, which had been placed on short rations in 1930, received only enough nourishment to enable it to restore a little of the weight it had lost since the depression and to repair some of the deficiencies it had suffered since 1918. Nor can it be doubted that the army leaders, in whom the years of parsimony had produced a distrust of politicians, were resolved to spend such funds as they received on something that the politician could not take away from them if the crisis seemed to have passed and the army's income could be cut again. Thus there was this additional reason for giving priority to guns and concrete rather than men and training: that if the vote was again reduced, the guns and concrete would remain. In the early years of rearmament at any rate, while some leaders on the liberal side in Parliament favoured a return to compulsory training, the army staff was happy enough about the retention of voluntary service while it spent its limited funds chiefly on that equipment without which a larger army would be of small value.

In the first two months of 1938, however, events in Europe and China began to move too rapidly to permit such leisurely rearmament. "What we are seeking to do is to get a general appeasement throughout Europe which will give us peace," said Chamberlain on 21st February.[1] In the

[8] *Sydney Morning Herald*, 29 Nov 1937.

[9] See "The Defence of Australia" by Maj H. C. H. Robertson, *Army Quarterly*, Apr 1935; and article on Defence of Australia, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 1 Dec 1937.

[1] *House of Commons Debates*, Vol. 332, p. 63.

Commons on the following day, Churchill, whose followers were increasing in number, said:

> This last week has been a good week for dictators—one of the best they have ever had. The German dictator has laid his hand upon a small but historic country, and the Italian dictator has carried his vendetta to a victorious conclusion against Mr Eden. Austria has been laid in thrall, and we do not know whether Czechoslovakia will not suffer a similar attack.[2]

Evidence of the alarm that was felt by the Australian Government was provided a month later when Mr Lyons announced that it was proposed in the next three years to spend £43,000,000 on the fighting Services and munitions. This was more than twice what had been spent in the previous three years. The army would receive £11,500,000, the air force £12,500,000 and the navy £15,000,000. Since 1920 the navy had year by year received more money than the army; now, for the first time, the air force too was promised a larger appropriation than the army's. Lyons announced too that an Inspector-General of the Army would be appointed, adding that "no authoritative report had been made on the army since the Senior Officers' Conference of A.I.F. war leaders in 1920"[3]—a poor compliment to the wise and frank reports which Sir Harry Chauvel had presented as Inspector-General between 1920 and 1930. Compared with the sum it had been receiving hitherto the army's new income, though the least of the three Services', was astronomical; yet in December 1938, after the Munich crisis, Mr Street,[4] the newly-appointed Minister for Defence, announced that the total of £43,000,000 for defence would be increased by an additional £19,504,000 to be spent during the three years which would end in 1941.

Excitement ran high in November and December of 1938. As a result of a recruiting campaign directed by Major-General Sir Thomas Blamey,[5] and in which the indefatigable Mr Hughes took a leading part, the militia was increased in numbers from 35,000 in September to 43,000 at the end of the year and 70,000, which was the objective, in March—22,000 more than the conscripted militia of 1929. This was a memorable achievement, unparalleled in any country which maintained a voluntary militia.[6] A night march of militiamen, now dressed in neater uniforms, through the streets of Sydney was watched by a crowd which the newspapers estimated at 100,000. A reserve of veterans of the A.I.F. and the British Army was established to reinforce militia units and form garrison battalions when war broke out. It was a strange turn of events that Mr Scullin's abolition of conscription had made necessary those very military parades and ornate uniforms that he detested.

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[2] *House of Commons Debates*, Vol. 332, p. 242.

[3] *Commonwealth Debates*, Vol. 155, p. 560.

[4] Brig Hon G. A. Street, MC. (1st AIF: 1 Bn 1914-16; BM 15 Bde 1917-18.) Min for Defence 1938-39, for Army 1939-40. B. Sydney 21 Jan 1894. Killed in aircraft accident 13 Aug 1940.

[5] Field Marshal Sir Thomas Blamey, GBE, KCB, CMG, DSO, VX1. (1st AIF: GSO1 1 Aust Div 1916-17; BGGS Aust Corps 1918.) GOC 6 Div 1939-40, 1 Aust Corps 1940-41; Dep C-in-C ME 1941; GOC-in-C AMF 1942-46. Of Melbourne; b. Wagga Wagga, NSW, 24 Jan 1884. Died 27 May 1951.

[6] In April the British Prime Minister announced that conscription would be introduced in the United Kingdom.

The promise of funds, the successful recruiting campaign and later, the taking of a national register (which was vehemently resisted by trade union organisations as being a step towards military and industrial conscription) sufficed to give citizens the impression that something was being done. It was too late, however, to achieve before war broke out what was far more important than these parades and promises, namely adequate equipment. Machines and weapons which the Australian Army, like the air force, had ordered four years before had not been delivered from British factories, which were fully employed in a last-minute effort to equip the British Army.

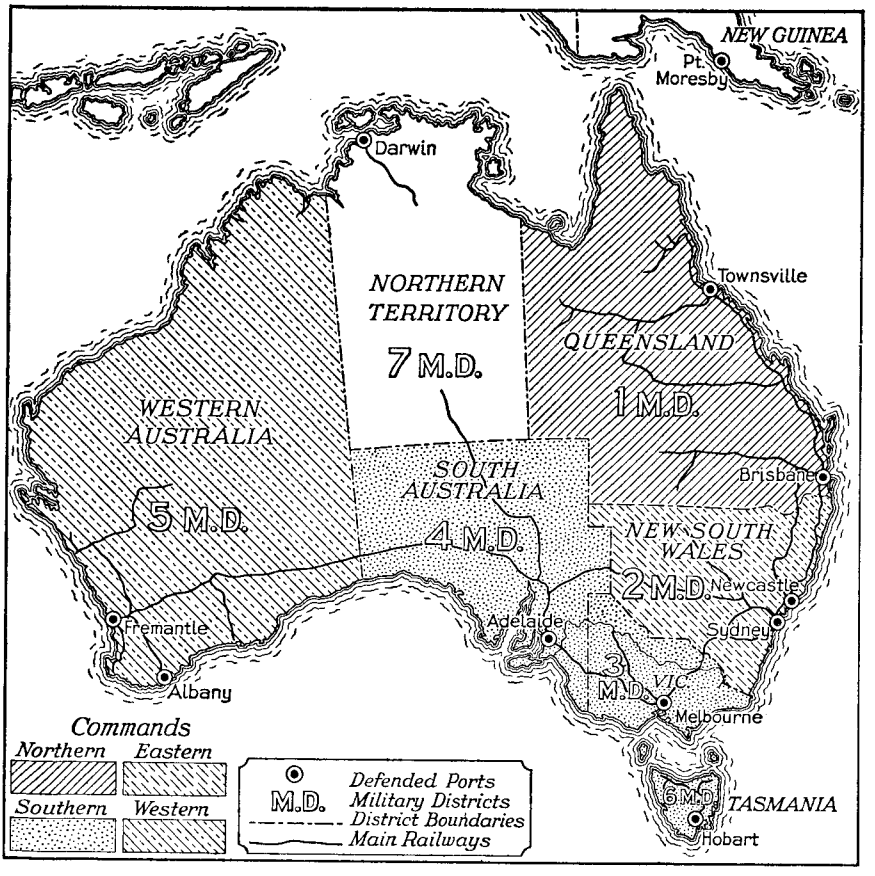
Major-General Squires[7] had been selected for the newly-revived post of Inspector-General and had taken up his appointment in June 1938. The Cabinet's decision to seek an officer of the British service as Inspector-General emphasised the extent to which a spirit of dependence on the parent country had survived; a British soldier (or admiral or air vice-marshal) was considered likely to possess virtues an Australian could not acquire. Squires was a competent senior staff officer, but there were several in the Australian Army who possessed equally high attainments and equal experience of war, even if one left out of account a number of generals—some of them younger than Squires—who might have been recalled from retirement to undertake the task. Squires had no experience of the Dominions or the special problems of Dominion armies; Australia had taken pains to create an expert corps of officers whose initial training was considerably longer than that given at the British military colleges, and whose post-graduate education was gained in part at British and Indian schools and staff colleges and on exchange duty in England and India. It was unfortunate that, when an "authoritative report" on the army was sought, the Government made an appointment which could be read as implying a lack of confidence in its own officer corps. When war broke out Squires was appointed Chief of the General Staff; a few months later the Government chose a British officer to be Chief of the Air Staff; the First Naval Member was already an officer of the British Service. Consequently in the early months of 1940 the Government's three senior advisers in the Services were officers with limited experience of Australian problems or the Australian people.

As Squires' staff officer—an important post because the newcomer would inevitably be greatly dependent on his advice—was chosen Lieut-Colonel Rowell,[8] a highly-qualified soldier twelve years Squires' junior who was considered one of the ablest of the early Duntroon graduates and had spent more than five of the previous thirteen years at British schools or with the British Army. Squires presented to the Government a report on the development of the army, and in March 1939 this report

[7] Lt-Gen E. K. Squires, CB, DSO, MC. (1914-18: Maj Ind Army, France and Mesopot.) Dir of Staff Duties, War Office 1936-38; Inspr-Gen AMF 1938-40; CGS 1939-40. B. Poona, India, 18 Dec 1882. Died 3 Mar 1940.

[8] Lt-Gen Sir Sydney Rowell, KBE, CB, VX3. (1st AIF: 3 LH Regt 1914-15.) BGS I Aust Corps 1940-41; Dep CGS AMF 1941-42; GOC I Aust Corps 1942; Dir Tac Investigation, War Office, 1943-46; CGS 1950-54. Regular soldier; of Adelaide; b. Lockleys, SA, 15 Dec 1894.

was presented to Parliament, although in an expurgated form. It confirmed the wisdom of the policy of giving priority to equipment and to measures intended to defend vital areas against attack, and made two radical proposals. The first was that the existing district bases (each coinciding



more or less with one or other of the States) and the infantry and cavalry divisions be regrouped into four "commands"—Northern (Queensland), Eastern (New South Wales), Southern (Victoria, Tasmania and South Australia), and Western, with an independent garrison at Darwin—each of which would be responsible for the training and, in war, for the operations of the formations in its area.[9] Under this system, which required an amendment of the *Defence Act* and was not brought into operation

[9] The first appointments to the new commands were: Northern, Maj-Gen H. D. Wynter; Eastern, Maj-Gen V. A. H. Sturdee; Southern, Lt-Gen J. D. Lavarack; Western, Maj-Gen J. M. A. Durrant; 7th Mil District (Darwin Garrison), Lt-Col H. C. H. Robertson. At the same time the *Defence Act* was amended to embrace the territories of Papua and Norfolk Island. Labour members spoke strongly against this amendment which entailed the extension of the area in which compulsorily-enlisted militiamen were obliged to serve.

until October 1939, Army Headquarters would deal with these commands only, whereas hitherto it had controlled separately the various divisions and brigade groups of the militia and the six military districts. His second important proposal was that a regular force of two brigades with a peace-time establishment of 7,500 be formed.[1] These, he pointed out, would be immediately available at all times, and "would also furnish a new and much-needed source of supply of permanent instructors for the militia, and afford the officers of the Staff Corps more opportunities for gaining experience in the command of troops than they can have at present".[2] The fact that the Ministry at first "approved in principle" this proposal for the creation of a miniature regular army, a measure which would again demand a radical amendment of the *Defence Act,* was a sign of the times.[3]

The fate of this proposed nucleus of a regular army was significant both of the continuing hesitancy of the Ministers to commit the country to heavy expenditure on the fighting Services and of how foreign was the idea of a regular army even to a Government which, certainly for a time, had been convinced that it was on the eve of war. In March the Government announced that a first quota of the new regular force would consist of two infantry battalions and one field artillery unit and would be authorised in the coming year (1939-40) and that this quota would total 1,571 men. The formation of further units, it was announced, would be a subject for later decision by the Government "which would doubtless be guided by the international situation".[4] In August, however, Mr Menzies,[5] who had become Prime Minister in April, announced that the Government had decided not to raise even this force, which, he pointed out, would have cost £1,875,000 in the first year. The money would be spent instead on intensified training of the militia. Mr Menzies said:

> It (the Government) feels that, while the national efforts are being properly directed towards putting Australia into a position to defend itself, regard must always be had to the inevitable future period of readjustments when the dangers of war have passed or are sensibly reduced. It is plainly much more practicable to effect, at some future time, a modification in citizen military training than to bring about a similar modification of measures which possess a permanent character.[6]

Thereupon the Military Board was instructed to prepare an alternative plan and, on 23rd August, the Government announced that it had been

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[1] In November 1938 Mr. Curtin had advocated the creation of a standing army of at least 10,000; such a plan had been canvassed in the press in the previous year.

[2] Statement by the Minister for Defence on the first report by Lt-Gen E. K. Squires, 14 Mar 1939, p. 4.

[3] True to the traditional English antipathy to regular armies the Australian *Defence Act* included a provision to the effect that only artillerymen and certain technical troops might be enlisted in the permanent military forces. This had produced odd anomalies. For example, when a contingent was formed to take part in the Coronation ceremonies in London in 1937 the rank and file had to be enlisted as gunners not infantry; and when in 1938 a Darwin Mobile Force of some 230 men was formed to provide that new naval station with a little garrison, the men, though most of them were in fact infantrymen, were enlisted in the Royal Australian Artillery.

[4] In Jan 1939 the establishment of the permanent forces totalled 3,572, including 957 instructors, 1,094 artillerymen, and 233 in the Darwin Mobile Force.

[5] Rt Hon R. G. Menzies, CH. Attorney-General 1935-39; Prime Minister and Min for Defence 1939-41; Prime Minister 1949-. B. Jeparit, Vic, 20 Dec 1894.

[6] *Sydney Morning Herald,* 3 Aug 1939, p. 9.

decided to enlist a special force of 14,000 militiamen who would agree to spend thirty-two days' annual training in camps in place of the normal twelve; that all militiamen would in future undergo sixteen not twelve days' training in camp each year; and all officers and N.C.O's would in addition do sixteen days' "home" training annually at the drill halls instead of twelve. The cost would be £1,470,000 in the first year, or £405,000 less than that of the proposed regular force. That day the pact between Germany and Russia was signed and the German armies were standing along the Polish frontier.

What had been achieved by twenty years of militia training? There were in 1914 and again in 1939 three kinds of armies. The long service volunteer regular armies of Great Britain and the United States were able to attain an unequalled degree of unit efficiency, though this was offset by the higher commanders' lack of experience in handling large formations. Next in order of efficiency came the large conscript armies of which, in Europe, the German had for generations been the model. With an expert general staff and, in each formation, a strong cadre of professional officers and N.C.O's, and a rank and file trained for periods ranging up to two or three years, these immense armies were able to move and fight at short notice. In a third category fell the militia armies maintained by nations influenced by a desire for economy or a belief, real or imaginary, in their relative security. Some of these nations—the Swiss for example—managed to create relatively effective militias by insisting on a period of initial training long enough to bring the recruits to a moderate standard of individual efficiency. But in the Australian militia (the British Territorial Army and the United States National Guard fell into much the same category—though probably less efficient in 1939 than the Australian force) the recruit lacked this basic training and had to acquire his skill as best he could during evening or one-day parades and brief periods in camp.[7]

In Australia, in spite of the brevity of the annual training given to the enthusiastic volunteer militiamen, they were made to undertake complicated and arduous exercises. It was decided that to spend one camp after another vainly trying to reach a good standard of individual training was likely to destroy the keenness of young recruits and was of small value to the leaders. For example, a coast defence exercise carried out in October 1938 north of Newcastle, N.S.W., first by the 1st Brigade and later by the 8th, entailed weeks of careful preliminary staff work and a fairly high degree of endurance and skill on the part of the units. The artillery fired over the heads of the infantry with accuracy and an air force squadron (No. 3) cooperated.

[7] The Australian system had an advantage over the British in that the highest commands were open to militia officers whereas the Territorial was, in practice, virtually excluded from them; and over the United States in that no political influence was exerted in the promotion and appointment of senior officers and it was therefore impossible for men without sound military experience to obtain commands.

However, so far as the aim of the Australian system had been to produce an army ready to advance against an enemy or even to offer effective opposition to an invader at short notice it had failed. At no time, either under the compulsory or the voluntary system, had the militia been sufficiently well trained to meet on equal terms an army of the European type based on two or three years of conscript service, and experience was to prove that perhaps six months of additional training with full equipment would be needed to reach such a standard. However, it would be wrong to conclude that the system had not achieved valuable results, and that the devoted effort of the officers and men who had given years of spare-time service had been wasted. The militia had not and could not make efficient private soldiers, but it did produce both a nucleus of officers who were capable of successfully commanding platoons, companies and battalions in action, and a body of useful N.C.O's. These men were fortunate to have been trained by highly-qualified professional and citizen soldiers who had seen hard regimental service in the war of 1914-18 and were able to hand down to them the traditions of the outstanding force in which they had been schooled (to that extent the militia owed its effectiveness more to the old A.I.F. than to its own system). And it should not be imagined that, because units were trained for only a week or two a year, the militia officers received no more experience than that. They generally gave much additional time to week-end and evening classes, to tactical exercises without troops and to reading; and the keenest among them attained a thorough knowledge of military fundamentals. A large proportion (but not always large enough, particularly in some city infantry units) were men of good education, and leaders in their professions. Genuine enthusiasm for soldiering was demanded of them, and there were few who did not suffer disadvantages in their civilian work because of their military service. Indeed, an important factor in the small attendances of other ranks at camps was the frequent inability of men to obtain leave from unpatriotic employers (and they were in a majority) except on prejudicial terms such as curtailment of annual vacations and delay in promotion; and an efficient officer had to give to military work much time that he could otherwise have spent profitably on his civilian business.

There remains the larger question: What had the Australian Government done between the wars to increase its ability to carry out its military responsibilities? In that period Australia had become a fully-independent nation, an enhancement of status in which she took some pride. She had greatly enlarged her colonial territory and had established her own diplomatic department. Her population had increased by nearly two millions and her industrial equipment had been vastly elaborated. There had been a corresponding increase in her responsibilities as a member of the British Commonwealth; and the military leaders of the senior member of the Commonwealth had declared that in a major war the

immediate help of trained, equipped forces from the Dominions would be needed. Yet in 1939 the now-adult nation possessed an army little different in essentials from that of the young Australia of 1914. It was fundamentally a defensive force intended if war broke out to go to its stations or man the coastal forts and await the arrival of an invader. History had proved and was to prove again the futility of such a military policy. The measures that had been taken in the few years of "re-armament" were insignificant in the face of the threat offered by two aggressive Powers, one of which desired to master Europe, the other East Asia.

CHAPTER 2

A SECOND A.I.F.

INEVITABLY the immediate cause of a war is some action which, when isolated, seems of petty importance beside the real causes. In Europe in 1939 the question whether or not there would be war was reduced finally to whether or not the German Government would order its army to invade Poland. Such an invasion would defy an undertaking by the United Kingdom Government to support Poland against "any action which clearly threatened Polish independence, and which the Polish Government accordingly considered it vital to resist with their national forces."[1] In the early morning of 1st September German forces crossed the Polish frontier, and at 11 a.m. on Sunday, 3rd September, an ultimatum by the British Government demanding the withdrawal of the German forces expired. Immediately Mr Chamberlain announced that Britain was at war with Germany. The responsibility for deciding the exact hour at which the world is to plunge into war rests on the political leaders. That decision made, there is an interval while the air is crowded by telephone, cable, and wireless signals, generally pre-arranged, to governments, senior officials and, eventually, to citizens who must report immediately for duty.

Thus, in Australia, soon after Chamberlain's announcement, Mr T. J. Hawkins of the Naval Secretariat informed the Secretary of the Defence Department, Mr Shedden,[2] that a naval signal had been received containing the order: "Commence hostilities at once against Germany." Shedden informed Mr F. Strahan, Secretary of the Prime Minister's Department, at Canberra, that although the pre-arranged signal from the Dominions Office announcing the outbreak of war had not arrived, this naval signal had been picked up. Within an hour a meeting of the Executive Council had been convened in the Prime Minister's room at the Commonwealth offices in Melbourne and the issue of a proclamation declaring the existence of a state of war approved. At 9.15 p.m. the voice of the Australian Prime Minister, Mr Menzies, was heard by listeners throughout Australia. "It is my melancholy duty", he said, "to inform you officially that, in consequence of a persistence by Germany, in her invasion of Poland, Great Britain has declared war upon her and that, as a result, Australia is also at war." After a lucid and simply-phrased account of the events in Europe that had immediately led to the declaration of war, he appealed to the people for calmness, resoluteness, confidence and hard work. He made no suggestion that Australia could have taken any other course than to stand beside Great Britain. At 10.14 a proclamation was issued in Canberra that Australia was at war, and, at 10.25 Mr Shedden signed a memorandum to the Secretary of the Military Board, as to other Federal

[1] Prime Minister in House of Commons 31 Mar 1939.

[2] Sir Frederick Shedden, KCMG, OBE. Sec, Dept of Defence 1937-56. B. Kyneton, Vic, 8 Aug 1893.

departments, stating that "the action specified in the Commonwealth War Book for the War Stage (including that for the Precautionary Stage not yet taken) should be initiated forthwith"; at 11.47 a message that war had begun was sent to all military districts.

The action to be taken by Federal departments when war broke out was set out in the "Commonwealth War Book", a thick loose-leaf volume which had been prepared by the senior staffs of the three fighting Services and the civil departments under the supervision of Mr Shedden and officers of the Department of Defence. The staffs of each of the fighting Services had prepared a companion volume, the army's being the "War Book of the Australian Military Forces" in which the army's plans were described in greater detail.

The plans of the little Australian Army provided for three stages of readiness. The signal for the adoption of the first stage was to be a decision by the Government that a state of tension existed. In this period the regular troops would man the coast defences and other precautionary measures would be taken. When the Government learnt that war was imminent a second precautionary series of preparations was to be adopted which would include preliminary steps to prepare for a war that would include the Far East. The plans anticipated that, on the actual declaration of war, the Government would direct the Chiefs of Staff of the fighting Services to prepare for either a war that was likely to be restricted to the Middle East and Europe or against a war in which Japan was an enemy. If the war seemed likely to be confined to Europe and the Mediterranean the War Book plan anticipated that the Chiefs of Staff would be asked only to defend vital centres against raids. In a war in which Japan or any other Eastern Power was an enemy the Chiefs of Staff would be called upon to order full mobilisation and make ready to resist invasion.

Already on 24th August, in anticipation of a cablegram from London warning that war was imminent, the Defence Committee—that is to say the Chiefs of Staff of the three Services and the Secretary of the Defence Department—had met in Melbourne and decided to advise the Government to take certain precautions as soon as the message arrived. The committee recommended, for example, that additional troops be sent to Darwin, some guns installed at Port Kembla to protect the steel works there, and guards placed on certain "vulnerable points" such as factories, wireless stations and railway centres. On the 25th warning signals had been sent to the military districts, the commanders of independent formations, and the isolated garrisons at Darwin and Port Moresby informing them that "a state of tension" existed with Germany; some militia officers of the heavy artillery were called up; the emergency coast defences were installed at Port Kembla and forty-four regular soldiers were flown to Darwin, where the commandant was instructed to enlist a local militia force of up to 250 men. Arrangements were made to send rifles and ammunition to Port Moresby and Rabaul. On 1st September the following long-awaited warning telegram arrived from London: "Precautionary Stage Adopted Against Germany and Italy." Next day proclamations were issued

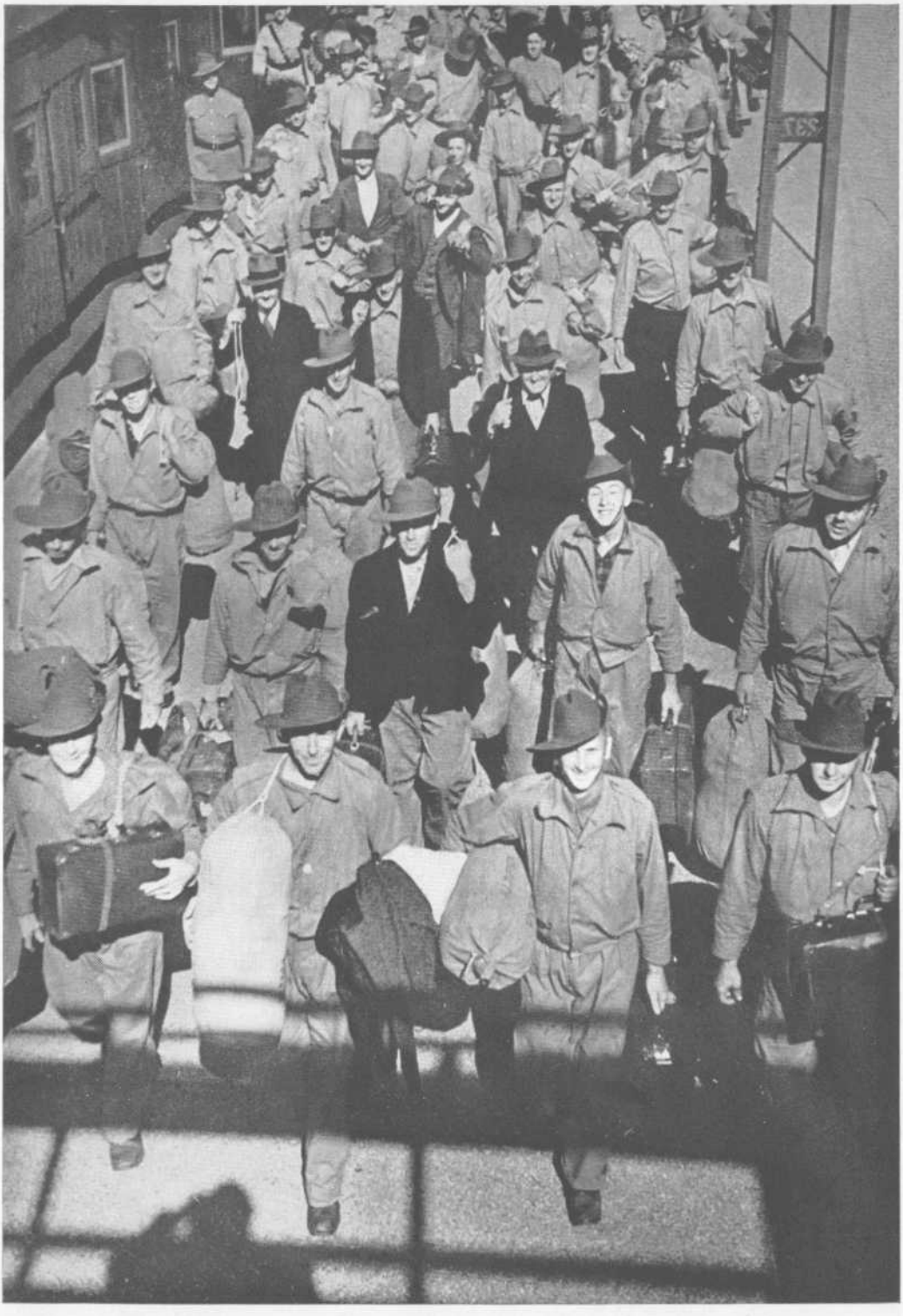


General Blamey and senior leaders of the A.I.F. at the embarkation of the second convoy in Melbourne in April 1940. Left to right: Lieut-Colonel F. H. Berryman, Colonel S. F. Rowell, Colonel S. R. Burston, Lieut-General Sir Thomas Blamey, Lieut-General J. D. Lavarack.



(Australian War Memorial photo)

Left to right: Brigadier S. G. Savige, Lieut-General Blamey, Major-General I. G. Mackay.



(Australian War Memorial photo)

A draft of Victorian recruits for the 6th Division entraining at Flemington for Puckapunyal, 2nd November 1939.

declaring that a danger of war existed and formally calling out the citizen forces. By 8.15 a.m. on 2nd September all military districts had been ordered to man the coast defences though, for the present, only with permanent troops. On the 5th, after the formal declaration of war, it was announced that militiamen would be called up 10,000 at a time for sixteen days to provide relays of guards on "vulnerable points."[3]

These were mere machine measures, and, since there seemed to be no sign of attack by Japan, the eyes of most Australians were fixed on a war in which they might have to shoulder their rifles and defend the *status quo* against Germany.

When the Federal Parliament met on 6th September Opposition members offered no criticism of the Government's action in entering the war; it was soon evident that the burning question was whether or not Australia would send forces overseas—the problem which had coloured every debate on defence in that Parliament for more than twenty years. In a short opening statement the Prime Minister made no reference to that possibility, but the leader of the Opposition, Mr Curtin, who spoke next, said:

> there ought not to be, but there may be, two major points of difference between the Government and ourselves. One is conscription, to which we are opposed. The other does not arise, in view of last night's pronouncement by the Government that it does not contemplate expeditionary forces. Those two issues are, as the Government knows and as the country knows, issues upon which the Opposition is pledged, and we are determined to maintain the views and the principles for which we have stood and fought while we have been a party.[4]

In reply, the Minister for External Affairs, Sir Henry Gullett,[5] said that he knew of no statement that the Government did not propose to send expeditionary forces overseas. "The Government had not yet seriously discussed the question", he added.

The Government was allowing its decision as to what form its assistance to Britain would take to await consideration of advice from the British Government. That advice arrived on 8th September in a long cablegram from the Dominions Office expressing the opinions of the British Chiefs of Staff. The Dominions Office based its recommendations on two alternative hypotheses, first "that Japan is not only neutral but adopting a friendly attitude towards the democratic countries", and secondly, "that Japan is neutral and reserving her attitude towards democratic countries." The Australian Government was warned that there must be preparation for a long war. "We therefore hope," the cablegram continued, "that Australia will exert her full national effort including preparation of her forces with a view to the dispatch of an expeditionary force." It was not yet possible

[3] They were relieved of this duty in the following month by detachments from seven garrison battalions quickly recruited from men who had served in the old AIF. By January there were eight such battalions with a total strength of 4,967.

[4] *Commonwealth Debates*, Vol. 161, p. 38.

[5] Hon Sir Henry Gullett, KCMG. (Official War Correspondent with AIF in Palestine 1918.) Min for External Affrs and Infm 1939-40. B. Harston, Vic, 22 Mar 1878. Killed in aircraft accident 13 Aug 1940.

to make any suggestion to the Commonwealth Government about the destination and composition of any expeditionary forces which they might see fit to provide, but the Commonwealth Government might like to consider whether it would prefer to relieve United Kingdom units and formations in, say, Singapore, Burma, or India as brigades became available, or would prefer to delay until complete divisions could be sent to a main theatre. The policy of the United Kingdom Government, the cablegram stated, was to avoid a rush of volunteers, but she would nevertheless welcome at once, for enlistment in United Kingdom units, technical personnel, such as fitters, electricians, mechanics, instrument mechanics, motor vehicle drivers and "officers with similar qualifications and medical officers." If Japan gave no evidence of a friendly attitude, it might be thought unwise for Australia to dispatch an expeditionary force overseas but the Commonwealth Government could assist by holding formations ready at short notice for reinforcement of Singapore, New Zealand, or British and French islands in the Western Pacific.

It is probable that uncertainty about Japanese policy was not the only reason for the British Government's hesitation to request military aid in the main theatre of war and the somewhat cautious tone of the communication. Britain lacked military equipment, and knew that the Dominions could not fully arm their own expeditionary forces; indeed that Australia, for example, was still awaiting the delivery of modest orders from Britain that had been lodged four years before. This general shortage had already set up in Britain a struggle for manpower between the fighting Services.

Until the Munich crisis Britain had been planning "a war of limited liability" in which only five regular divisions would be prepared for service on the Continent. After Munich, however, Britain reached an agreement with France whereby she would have thirty-two divisions (including six of regulars) ready for oversea service within a year after the outbreak of a war. This entailed doubling the territorial army; yet the equipment of the unexpanded territorial army was then no better than that of the Australian militia. After war broke out the British Government decided to prepare to equip fifty-five divisions—her own thirty-two and twenty-three from the Dominions, India and "prospective Allies."[6] This estimate was evidently based on an estimate that contingents from the Dominions would be on the scale of 1918, when there were six Australian divisions (including one mounted), four Canadian divisions, one "Anzac" mounted division and one New Zealand division in the field.[7]

It was already evident that it would be impossible for Australia to be at war and Australians to stand aloof. For example, to have withheld

[6] W. K. Hancock and M. M. Gowing, *British War Economy* (1949), pp. 67-68 and 96.

[7] "There would obviously not be sufficient manpower and industrial resources to meet all demands, therefore there was a tendency to go slow for a bit." Maj-Gen de Guingand, *Operation Victory* (1947), p. 27. De Guingand was at this time military secretary to the British Secretary for War, Mr Hore-Belisha.

the ships of the Australian Navy, if it was decided that they were more urgently needed in foreign waters, would have been morally indefensible, because, under the treaties of naval limitation which had expired only three years before, these ships had been reckoned as part of British naval strength. Moreover, for several years Australia had been sending batches of trained pilots to serve in the Royal Air Force and these young men were now with their squadrons on active service. Also the nucleus staff of an Australian flying-boat squadron was in England waiting to take delivery of their boats and fly them to Australia, and the British Government specifically asked that these men and their aircraft be allowed to remain in England at the Air Ministry's disposal. Could these men be brought home leaving others to fly their boats in action? The Ministers could be certain that if no expeditionary force was raised no regulation could prevent Australians from finding their way to other Allied countries to enlist; and the British Government had already asked that professional men and technicians be allowed to volunteer for service in the British forces.

Not all Labour leaders were opposed to voluntary service overseas. For example, early in September Mr E. Dwyer-Gray, the Labour Premier of Tasmania, had said that his Government would approve the sending of a volunteer expeditionary force to New Guinea and Singapore, and on 15th September a meeting of the New South Wales Trades and Labour Council rejected a proposal that, if a voluntary force was raised, it should be used only in Australian territory.[8] Nevertheless, most of those Labour members who broached the subject in the Federal Parliament on 6th September opposed an expedition on the ground that every man would be needed for home defence. "Australia, with its huge territory and sparse population," said Mr Ward, for example, "cannot afford to send men out of this country to take part in the conflict overseas. They will be required here to defend Australia . . . . I believe that if we defend Australia, we shall do all that can reasonably be expected of us."[9] Mr Blackburn said that he opposed voluntary recruiting for overseas service "as being the first step towards compulsion."[1] But Senator R. V. Keane said that "if ever there was an occasion on which the Labour party was interested in an overseas war it is now, because it is vitally concerned with the overthrow of that system which has plunged the world into this Armageddon."[2]

Within a day after the declaration of war by Britain and France the Japanese Government shed a little light on its policy by informing the belligerents of its intention to remain not "neutral" but "independent."

[8] At a conference of the Federal executive of the Labour party in May 1939 Tasmanian delegates had advocated compulsory training for home defence. However, the party's program when war broke out still included the abolition of all clauses of the *Defence Act* relating to compulsory training and "no raising of forces for service outside the Commonwealth, or participation or promise of participation in any future overseas war, except by decision of the people."

[9] *Commonwealth Debates,* Vol. 161, p. 72.

[1] *Commonwealth Debates,* Vol. 161, p. 55.

[2] *Commonwealth Debates,* Vol. 161, p. 18.

Thus, while fear that Japan would take advantage of the preoccupation of Britain and France in Europe had always to be taken into account, it appeared that, for the present, either she was too heavily committed in China—and Manchuria where a minor war against Russian frontier troops was in progress—or she intended to wait and see how affairs developed in Europe. Nevertheless plans for sending Australian expeditionary forces abroad had to take into account the possibility of both of Germany's allies, Italy and Japan, being at war. In that event Britain and France would be outnumbered at sea and, unaided, could not command the oceans both in the West and the East. Moreover, the British and French Air Forces were inferior both in Europe and the East to those of their enemies or potential enemies.

In addition to fear of Japan, lack of equipment, and the opposition of the Labour party, there were other brakes on the sending abroad of a military force. One of these was the widespread conviction that, in the coming war, armies would play a far less important part than in the past. It had become apparent between the wars that the air forces would inflict greater damage in a future struggle than in 1914-18 and also that the increasing elaboration of the equipment of each of the fighting Services would require that a greater proportion of a belligerent's manpower than hitherto would be needed in the factories and in the maintenance units of the forces. Enthusiasts had expounded these points with such extravagant eloquence that the impression had become fairly general that armies, and, in particular, infantry would play a minor part in the coming war, an impression which air force leaders and industrialists had done much to encourage.[3] An additional brake on a full-scale war effort was the opinion not noised abroad but nevertheless widely entertained at the time by leaders in politics and industry in Australia as in England—and Germany—that an uneasy peace would be negotiated leaving Germany holding her gains in eastern and central Europe.

However, a chain of events had been set in motion and there could be no arresting it. War had been declared; Britain was in danger; Australians should be there. To probably a majority of Australians the problem was seen in as simple terms as that. And on 9th September the New Zealand Government, which faced a similar situation, announced that it had decided to raise a "special military force" for service in or beyond New Zealand, and as a first step 6,600 volunteers were to be enlisted. In Australia most of the newspapers had from the beginning urged that an expeditionary force be formed, and as days passed and no decision was announced, their demands became more vehement. "The outward complacency of a Federal Government actually engaged in carrying on a war," declared the *Sydney Morning Herald,* for example, on 14th September, "is beginning to arouse more than astonishment among the Australian public."

[3] In *Operation Victory* de Guingand wrote: "I always felt that there were many people in high places who thought that we could get through the war without any real fighting on land."

Finally, on the 15th, after Parliament had risen for the week-end, Mr Menzies, in a regular Friday night broadcast, announced that a force of one division and auxiliary units would be created—20,000 men in all—for service either at home or abroad "as circumstances permit." At the same time, he said, the militia would be called up in two drafts each of 40,000 to receive a month's continuous training, which would be extended if the situation demanded. The new infantry division, he said, would consist of one brigade group from New South Wales, one from Victoria and one from the smaller States (as had the 1st Division of the A.I.F. of 1914). Privates and N.C.O's must be over 20 and under 35, subalterns under 30, captains under 35, majors under 40 and lieut-colonels under 45, and preference would be given to single men not in "essential civil jobs."

We are at war (he said) as part of the British Empire. Our strategic position may very well change from time to time according to the alignment of the combatant nations. At present the prime necessity is to ensure the defence of Australia itself. But it would be wrong to assume that throughout the duration of the war our duty would continue to be as circumscribed as that . . . . It may be that, under some circumstances, Australian forces might be used to garrison some of the Pacific islands, to cooperate with New Zealand, to release British troops at Singapore, or at other posts around the Indian Ocean. Under other circumstances it may be practicable to send Australian forces to Europe.

In the House of Representatives five days later he emphasised that he considered that, at least at first, the provision of a military force would be of secondary importance.

We have been in very close touch with the Government of the United Kingdom (he said) as to the most appropriate and effective means of rendering assistance, and we know from the communications which have passed between us, and from our study of the position generally, that—particularly during the first year of the war, when the production of military aircraft in Great Britain and France will be rapidly expanding, and when it may be anticipated that air warfare will be of predominating importance—the greatest possible assistance that can be given to Great Britain will be in the provision of trained air crews.[4]

In a broadcast address a week later he said "that Great Britain did not want Australia to send a large force of men abroad" and expressed the opinion that "any active help that Australia gave would be in the air." "Every step we take," he added, "must be well considered, and we must not bustle around in all directions as if we were just trying to create an illusion of activity. We must see that every step is a step forward."[5] On the other hand, on 8th September the British Government had spoken not of a division but divisions.

An additional curb on plans for a possible expeditionary force was provided by the fact that the army staff, acutely aware of their lack of equipment and the time it would take to acquire it, were anxious not to

[4] *Commonwealth Debates*, Vol. 161, p. 840.

[5] *Sydney Morning Herald*, 28 Sep 1939. It was on 28 Sep that the Canadian Minister for National Defence announced that Canada (less preoccupied than Australia by the possibility of war in the East) would send a division overseas.

lose their bird in the hand—the militia—whose strength was already being threatened by a policy of withdrawing men from it to serve in industry. When the people were told that the militia would be called up 10,000 at a time to continue training and to guard vulnerable points it was announced that "experts" would cull out militiamen in reserved or exempted occupations. Before the actual medical examination and attestation of recruits for the special force began a list of these occupations was published. This list, which followed closely a similar British list prepared as a necessary step towards rapid and full national mobilisation, military and industrial, was applied in Australia—a country which at this time was not contemplating such mobilisation, but merely the raising of forces far smaller relatively than European nations maintained in peace. It provided, for example, that tradesmen such as shearers and carpenters would not be accepted if they were over 30; foremen if over 25; brewing leading hands over 25; there was a complete ban on the enlistment of engineers holding degrees or diplomas. The list occupied three columns of small type in the newspapers. Later it was provided that men in reserved occupations might enlist if it was guaranteed that they would be employed in their trade capacity.

Added reason for the army staff's anxiety about the militia was provided on 10th October—four days after Hitler's peace offer to Britain and France—when the War Cabinet decided not to fill gaps caused by enlistment in the A.I.F. and discharges to reserved occupations. Already the Government had decided to allow married men to transfer to the reserve after one month's training. These decisions threatened to reduce the militia by half, since 10,000 vacancies in the A.I.F. had been allotted to it, more than 6,000 men had been lost to the reserved occupations in the first few weeks of the war, and an additional 16,000 men of the force were married.

In September 1939 the militia had a strength of about 80,000, that is to say about 40 per cent of the full mobilisation strength of the four infantry and two cavalry divisions, the independent brigades and ancillary units. Considerably more than half the citizen soldiers of September 1939 had been in the force less than a year. All divisional and brigade commanders and most unit commanders had served as regimental officers in the war of 1914-18 and the junior officers had been trained under these experienced leaders,[6] but the strength in veteran leaders in the senior ranks was offset by an extreme shortage of regular officers to fill key staff posts. A divisional commander was fortunate if he had two Staff Corps officers on his own staff, four as brigade majors and four or five as adjutants. Substantially the force was armed with the weapons which the A.I.F. had brought back in 1919; the infantry with rifles, and Lewis and Vickers machine-guns; the artillery regiments with 18-pounder field guns and 4.5-inch howitzers. Most of the signal and engineer equipment was

[6] For example the GOC of the 2nd Div was I. G. Mackay who had commanded a brigade in 1918 and his three infantry brigadiers, L. J. Morshead, J. J. Murray and A. S. Allen, had all commanded battalions in action.

obsolete nor was there enough to meet active service conditions. Obsolescence and deficiency are relative terms; there were armies in Europe which were not so well equipped as the Australian militia, but Australians judged their force by the standard of the British regular army. There were not enough anti-tank and modern anti-aircraft guns in Australia fully to equip one unit. The tank corps consisted of a small training section with a few out-dated tanks.

The only weapons that the Australian factories were manufacturing for the army were anti-aircraft guns of an out-dated type, rifles and Vickers machine-guns, though it was hoped soon to be producing Bren light machine-guns to replace the Lewis guns which were already decrepit and would soon be quite worn out, and machine-gun carriers and 3-inch mortars had been ordered. If the militia and the special force were to be modernly armed from Australian sources it would be necessary to manufacture field, anti-aircraft and anti-tank guns, mortars, pistols, grenades, armoured fighting vehicles, a wide variety of other technical gear, and thousands of waggons. To meet these requirements would demand expenditure on factories and war material on a far higher scale than Australian Governments had hitherto contemplated.

On 29th September Mr Casey, the Minister for Supply and Development, submitted to the War Cabinet (which had been established the previous day) a proposal for capital expenditure on new munitions projects amounting to £2,755,000 "to bring munitions production up to a condition whereby the war may be prosecuted effectively." The largest item but one was £750,000 to build a second explosives filling factory at, perhaps, Albury, because the existence of only one such factory which a single air attack or a single accident might put out of action had long been an anxiety. This was agreed to; but the largest item, £855,000, to extend the Commonwealth's only gun factory and its ammunition and explosives factories so that they could produce 25-pounder field guns and ammunition, was not approved. A few weeks later a proposal to buy 2,860 motor vehicles, including 664 motor cycles, for the militia and 784, including 180 motor cycles, for the new division was approved. Those numbers, however, would not equip either force for war, but only for training, the vehicles on the war establishment of one infantry division at that time being about 3,000.

In this way plans for adequately equipping the army in general and the A.I.F. in particular were allowed to proceed at only cautious pace. The Treasury officials seemed resolved that the war should not be an excuse for undue extravagance on the part of the Services. Fortunately Casey's department persisted in the proposal to make 25-pounder guns and, on 17th January, succeeded in obtaining Cabinet assent to the expenditure of £400,000 (less than half the original sum) to provide for the manufacture of 25-pounder field guns and 2-pounder anti-tank guns. There had then, however, been a delay of four months in initiating the manufacture of modern field guns, in spite of the fact that at the outset, in September, the War Cabinet had been told that the guns with which the militia was

equipped were "obsolete" although "quite effective for local defence". This was a somewhat optimistic description of them, and, in any event, there were not enough to equip the A.I.F. as well as the home army, as will be seen below.

In February the Treasury urged the War Cabinet that a brake be applied to orders of vehicles for the A.I.F. "pending further consideration of the sphere in which 6th Division is to operate and if mechanical transport is to accompany it overseas". There was some anxiety among the officials lest the shipping of vehicles to the Middle East might reduce the space available for wheat cargoes, and, in the same month, the Board of Business Administration suggested that orders for army vehicles be related to the shipping space available on the Middle East route. Whatever may have been the relative value to the war effort of a shipload of wheat and a shipload of military vehicles, the Treasury officials' notion that the question whether or not the A.I.F. was equipped with vehicles should be deferred until its destination was known was a strange one. The implications appear to be that, in certain areas of the Middle East and Europe, vehicles are not needed by an army, and that, in war, once an army is placed in an area it remains there for the duration.

Thus, the Government had called for volunteers for an expeditionary force, but on a minimum scale; and had approved a plan of militia training, but one which would take only 40,000 men at a time away from fields and factories. By 15th September it had approved expenditure on the fighting Services and munitions amounting to over £40,000,000—as much, as Mr Menzies pointed out, as Australia had spent in 1915-16 "with the war in full blast and large forces overseas"—and the Services were asking for more and more. "I don't say this with any pleasure," said Menzies, "because I know what it means, and what a burden it means placing on you. But it completely disproves the ill-founded and damaging suggestion that Australia is hanging back." Relative to pre-war military expenditure it was indeed a huge sum, but, in relation to the demands that would be made if full mobilisation became necessary, it was small indeed; and, in any circumstances, could be based only on an assumption that the greater part of the equipment the Australian forces needed could be bought from Britain.

Throughout October a decision about the future of the Second A.I.F., as the new force was named, was deferred. In a submission to the War Cabinet the three Chiefs of Staff[7] emphasised the danger of attack by Japan, pointing out that the advice from the British Government had disregarded the possibility that Japan would be hostile. They said, however, that, by the end of December, if Japan was friendly, battalions or brigades of the A.I.F., though little more than rifles and bayonets could be spared to arm them, could be sent overseas to continue training and relieve

[7] Lt-Gen E. K. Squires, Admiral Sir Ragnar Colvin and AVM S. J. Goble.

United Kingdom garrison units, but with a proviso that when fully trained and equipped they be reassembled in an Australian division. If Japan was hostile, no troops could be sent out of Australia except to reinforce Far Eastern garrisons and localities "as a measure of Australian defence." The Chiefs of Staff recommended an increase totalling 15,000 to 20,000 in the peace establishment of the militia, and advised that, after the establishment of the first division, further recruitment for the special force be by way of the militia with very few exceptions. They opposed the recruitment of skilled technicians for the British Army. After considering these recommendations the War Cabinet decided, on 25th October, to inform the Dominions Office that the period needed to train the Second A.I.F. even up to the stage where it might be possible to send units abroad for garrison duty and further training would "afford a further opportunity for the international position to clarify itself as to the possibility of the dispatch of an expeditionary force from Australia." Meanwhile the staffing and organisation of that force proceeded. It was named the 6th Division, there being four infantry divisions and the elements of a fifth in the militia.

When war began the senior general on the active list of the Australian Army was Major-General Gordon Bennett,[8] 52 years of age, who had not held a command for seven years. After him came Major-General Sir Thomas Blamey, 55, who had been on the unattached list for two years, and then Major-General Lavarack, 53, who had been Chief of the General Staff since 1935 and had been on a tour of duty abroad since May 1939, while Lieut-General Squires acted both as Inspector-General and Chief of the General Staff. Next on the list were the Adjutant-General, Sir Carl Jess,[1] 55, who had been a brigade commander in France when the previous war ended, Major-General Phillips,[2] 57, Major-General Drake-Brockman,[3] 55, commanding the 3rd Division and Major-General Mackay,[4] 57, commanding the 2nd. Of these all but Bennett, Drake-Brockman and Mackay were or had been regular soldiers. Unless the Cabinet were either notably to disregard seniority or to recall a retired officer, it was from among these senior major-generals that the commander of the new force must be chosen. To find a leader aged, say, 50 or less, it would have been necessary to go far down the list to colonels of the Staff Corps such as V. A. H.

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[8] Lt-Gen H. Gordon Bennett, CB, CMG, DSO, NX70343. (1st AIF: CO 6 Bn 1915-16; Comd 3 Inf Bde 1916-19.) GOC 8 Div 1940-42, III Aust Corps 1942-44. Public accountant and company director; of Sydney; b. Balwyn, Vic, 16 Apr 1887.

[1] Lt-Gen Sir Carl Jess, CB, CMG, CBE, DSO. (1st AIF: CO 7 Bn 1916-17; Comd 10 Inf Bde 1918-19.) Chairman Manpower Ctte Dept of Defence 1939-42. Regular soldier; of Melbourne; b. Bendigo, Vic, 16 Feb 1884. Died 16 Jun 1948.

[2] Maj-Gen O. F. Phillips, CMG, DSO. (1st AIF: Comd 14 AFA Bde 1916-17; CRA 2 Div 1917-19.) Inspector of Coast and AA Defences 1939-42. Regular soldier; of Melbourne; b. Warwick, Qld, 9 Jun 1882.

[3] Maj-Gen Hon E. A. Drake-Brockman, CB, CMG, DSO. (1st AIF: CO 16 Bn 1916-18; Comd 4 Inf Bde 1918.) GOC 3 Div 1937-42. Judge, C'wealth Arbitration Ct 1927, Chief Judge 1947-49. Of Perth, WA; b. Busselton, WA, 21 July 1884. Died 1 Jun 1949.

[4] Lt-Gen Sir Iven Mackay, KBE, CMG, DSO, NX363. (1st AIF: CO 4 Bn 1916-17, 1 MG Bn 1918; Comd 1 Inf Bde 1918-19.) GOC 6 Div 1940-41, Home Forces 1941-42, NGF 1943-44. High Commnr for Aust in India 1944-48. Schoolmaster; of Sydney; b. Grafton, NSW, 7 Apr 1882.

Sturdee,[5] the Director of Staff Duties at Army Headquarters, or senior militia infantry brigadiers such as L. J. Morshead[6] or A. S. Allen.[7]

One of the senior candidates, Blamey, not only had the very substantial qualification of having been General Monash's chief staff officer in France in 1918, but was well known to two leading members of the Cabinet. Mr Menzies had been Attorney-General in the Victorian Government when Blamey had been the Commissioner of Police and had then been impressed by Blamey's firmness and clear thinking; Mr Casey had served as a junior to Blamey on Gallipoli and in France on the staff of the 1st Australian Division and the Australian Corps. These two ministers had decided at the time of the Munich crisis in 1938 that, by reason of both his ability and experience, Blamey was the man to command the Australian Army if war broke out. In this decision they had the support of at least one senior leader of the First A.I.F. Sir Brudenell White,[8] who had been General Birdwood's chief of staff, and later Chief of the General Staff in Australia, was not consulted but, after Blamey had been appointed, he said that he considered that Blamey was the only man who could cope with the political aspects of the task of a commander of a Dominion force overseas and, particularly, would be able to preserve the integrity of an Australian force abroad. White feared that unless a man was chosen who could deal firmly with such problems the Australian division would soon be split up into brigades by the British commander in the area and the force would begin to lose its identity and unity.

This decision passed over Bennett, a gallant and able fighting leader, but one whom some senior soldiers considered to lack the tactfulness needed in the commander of a Dominion force which had to cooperate closely with British and Allied armies. He had become widely known as an outspoken critic of weaknesses in Australian defence—evidence of his enthusiasm for his country and its army. It was a sharp disappointment also to Lavarack, when he arrived at Perth on 27th September on his way from England, to be told by Squires that he was not to command the 6th Division, but that Blamey probably would be selected. He learnt from Squires also that Squires himself was to be appointed to replace Lavarack permanently as Chief of the General Staff, the post of Inspector-General having lapsed, and that the Prime Minister had "announced *(without reference to anybody)* that the commands in that division would go to militiamen." Lavarack was able to reflect that his service as a regular officer had been longer than Blamey's, that it had included four years as

[5] Lt-Gen Sir Vernon Sturdee, KBE, CB, DSO, NX35000. (1st AIF: CRE 5 Aust Div 1917-18; GSO 2 GHQ BEF France 1918.) GOC Eastern Comd 1939-40; CGS 1940-42, 1946-50; i/c Mil Mission Washington 1942-44; GOC First Army 1944-45. Regular soldier; of Melbourne; b. Frankston, Vic, 16 Apr 1890.

[6] Lt-Gen Sir Leslie Morshead, KCB, KBE, CMG, DSO, NX8. (1st AIF: 2 Bn and CO 33 Bn 1916-19.) Comd 18 Inf Bde 1939-41; GOC 9 Div 1941-43, I Corps 1944-45. Branch manager shipping line; of Sydney; b. Ballarat, Vic, 18 Sep 1889. Died 26 Sep 1959.

[7] Maj-Gen A. S. Allen, CB, CBE, DSO, NX2. (1st AIF: 13 Bn and CO 45 Bn 1918.) Comd 16 Inf Bde 1939-41; GOC 7 Div 1941-42, 6 Div 1942-43, NT Force 1943-44. Chartered accountant; of Sydney; b. Hurstville, NSW, 10 Mar 1894. Died 25 Jan 1959.

[8] Gen Sir Brudenell White, KCB, KCMG, KCVO, DSO. (1st AIF: GSO1 1 Div; BGGS Aust Corps: MGGS Fifth Army.) CGS Aust 1920-23 and 1940. Regular soldier; of Melbourne; b. St Arnaud, Vic, 23 Sep 1876. Killed in aircraft accident 13 Aug 1940.

Chief of the General Staff, the most important post the peace-time army could offer. However, he had not won the confidence of the Ministers to the extent that Blamey had, nor—and this was to produce consequences which cannot be overlooked—did Blamey have as much confidence in Lavarack as in some of his juniors. The War Cabinet, at its first meeting on 28th September, appointed Squires as Chief of the General Staff, Blamey to command the 6th Division and Lavarack to the Southern Command.[9]

The new appointments all became effective on 13th October, on which day both Blamey and Lavarack were promoted to the rank of lieut-general, and the officers who had been chosen for the four new commands—Northern, Eastern, Southern and Western—took up their appointments. All of these were regular officers, and thus, while the principal staff officers at Army Headquarters and the four area commanders and their senior staff officers were regulars, the commander of the 6th Division and the generals leading the six home-service divisions were all militiamen.

Menzies' statement that the commanders in the new force would be provided by the militia had caused chagrin not only to Squires and Lavarack, but to the regular officers generally. For nearly twenty years a sense of injustice and frustration had grievously affected the outlook of this corps. Not until 1935 and 1936 had most of the senior Duntroon graduates regained in the peace-time army the substantive rank and the pay they had won in the A.I.F. A number of their most enterprising members had resigned and had joined the British or the Indian Armies where they had gained more rapid promotion than those who remained in Australia. Promotion of militia officers had been relatively rapid so that some had risen from the ranks to lieut-colonels in ten years, while it had been usual for a Staff Corps officer, after having spent eight years as a lieutenant, to remain in the rank of captain for ten or, perhaps, twelve.[1] The pre-war plan for the overseas force had provided that one-third of the commanding officers might be chosen from the Staff Corps; the corps mistakenly interpreted the Prime Minister's statement as meaning that regular officers were to be debarred from commands in the new A.I.F. In fact, however, before the 6th Division was fully organised one Staff Corps officer had been appointed to command a unit,[2] and, before the division went into action one of its brigadiers and several commanding officers were regulars. But the effect of the omission of regular officers from the first list of appointments to A.I.F. commands was to make the

[9] At the same time it approved the transfer of Squires' two principal staff officers, Jess, the Adjutant-General, to be Chairman of the Manpower Committee, a post hitherto held by Blamey, and Phillips, the Quartermaster-General and Master-General of Ordnance, to be Inspector of Coast and Anti-aircraft Defences. They were replaced by two younger officers, Col C. G. N. Miles as Adjutant-General, and Col E. K. Smart as Quartermaster-General. Col T. R. Williams became Master-General of Ordnance.

[1] For example on 1 Mar 1923 G. A. Vasey, who had been a maj in the AIF in 1917-19, was promoted to the substantive rank of capt in the Staff Corps. On 31 May 1923 K. W. Eather was commissioned lieut in the 53 Bn of the militia at the age of 21. Eather reached the rank of lt-col commanding a battalion on 1 Jul 1935. Vasey was promoted to the substantive rank of maj in the Staff Corps on 1 Mar 1935.

[2] Maj C. E. Prior, to command 2/1 MG Bn. By 23 Jan, 47 of the 331 officers of the Staff Corps and 9 of the 233 quartermasters of the Instructional Corps had been appointed to the AIF.

corps more firmly resolved than ever to defend its interests—in fact to make it to a greater degree a compact and defensive group within the army as a whole.[3]

The commander of the new division, General Blamey, was born in 1884 at Wagga, in New South Wales, the son of a rural worker. After working as a schoolteacher he obtained in 1906 a commission in the Administrative and Instructional Staff—the corps to which were allotted most of the regular officers in that period. In 1912 and 1913 he attended the Staff College at Quetta in India and was on exchange duty in India and England until the end of 1914 when, as a major, he was appointed to the general staff of the 1st Australian Division. Afterwards General Gellibrand, then a fellow major on the staff of the division, wrote of him as he was at that time: "Short of stature, rugged in appearance, it took some little time to discover that behind that broad forehead there was well seated an unusual brain, and that the square jaw denoted not obstinacy and lack of tact, but quiet resolution and a calm and definite power of expression."[4] He joined the 1st Division at the beginning of its training in Egypt, landed with it at Anzac, and served with it and later with the 2nd Division in the Gallipoli campaign during which his explorations of the front line and in no-man's land gave evidence of his personal bravery. Recognised as a very able officer, in July 1916, when only 32, he was appointed senior staff officer (G.S.O.1) of the 1st Division with the rank of lieut-colonel and in June 1918 General Monash, who had just been appointed to command the Australian Corps, took Blamey with him as his senior staff officer, with the rank of brigadier-general.

Monash, himself a brilliant organiser, and one for whose intellect and breadth of view the young Blamey had great respect, wrote of his chief of staff that "he possessed a mind cultured far above the average, widely informed, alert and prehensile. He had an infinite capacity for taking pains." His orders, Monash added, "were accurate, lucid in language, perfect in detail, and always an exact interpretation of my intention."[5]

When the war ended Blamey, though he was only 34, was one of the most senior of those regular Australian officers whose wartime experience had been in command or in general staff appointments. In 1920 he was appointed Deputy Chief of the General Staff in Australia, and from 1922 to 1925 served as Australian representative at the War Office in London. Soon after his return to Australia he was appointed Chief Commissioner of Police in Victoria, where recently the police force had passed through a dangerous crisis and for a time had been on strike. He held this appointment until 1936 when he resigned and was replaced by a professional police officer.

General Monash's praise did no more than justice to the swiftness and clarity of Blamey's mind, his quick appreciation of the essentials of any

[3] "All this," said one sage and senior citizen soldier, "bound them up into a close corporation, so that if you touched one of them you hurt them all."

[4] Quoted in "Celebrities of the AIF" by A. W. Bazley, *Reveille*, 1 Nov 1939.

[5] *The Australian Victories in France in 1918*, p. 296.

problem that faced him and his power of logical analysis and clear decision. The political aspects of a military problem were within his grasp. He won the regard of almost all the political leaders with whom he was in close touch because he was above all a realist and could offer them a well-defined line of policy, clearly and firmly presented. By experience and temperament he was well fitted to cope with the problems of a commander of a Dominion expeditionary force and to steer a course between his loyalty to the Ministers at home and a perhaps conflicting loyalty to a British or Allied commander-in-chief in the field. In his time as chief of Monash's staff the A.I.F. had fought next to French, British, Canadian, and American troops in circumstances often calling for diplomatic judgment in balancing the interests of his country with the general interest. It was this quality and experience which led old A.I.F. chiefs to back him in 1939 for command of the Second A.I.F.

A gap in his otherwise wide experience was the brevity of his service as a regimental officer. In France he had commanded a battalion for three weeks and a brigade for six; otherwise his service had been on the staff. And in any event he had qualities of temperament that would probably have ensured that he achieved greater success as a staff officer or senior commander than as a leader of a unit or a formation. As a junior he kept to himself and made few close friends. In later life, to those who crossed his path he was hard and unsympathetic. Insubordination or criticism were not forgiven. His juniors were more likely to fear than love him, for he lacked Birdwood's ability to win a deeply affectionate response from his subordinates. The rank and file regarded him as a tough leader of undoubted capacity and were ready to trust his decisions; but to many of them the fact that he had the reputation of being a *bon viveur* was a bar to warmer feelings. Although when he addressed the troops he almost invariably spoke wisely and impressively, he had little talent for—probably no interest in—the astute and carefully managed words and gestures when moving among his men that help to create in the soldier's mind a picture of the good general.

Two of the infantry brigade commanders whom Blamey chose—Allen and Morshead—had led battalions in the war of 1914-18 when they were still in their twenties. The third, Savige,[6] after service as an N.C.O. at Gallipoli and as a subaltern in France, had commanded a small independent force in action in Kurdistan in 1918. Allen of the 16th was a chartered accountant by profession and a devoted amateur soldier who had been first commissioned in 1913 at the age of 19 under the universal training system. At 24 he was leading his battalion (the 45th) in the battle of Dernancourt, for the last six years he had commanded the 14th Infantry Brigade. Blunt in speech, honest as the day, choleric yet kindly, completely without affectation or pomposity, he was a leader of a kind that appeals immediately to Australians. His military lore was drawn

[6] Lt-Gen Sir Stanley Savige, KBE, CB, DSO, MC, VX13. (1st AIF: 24 Bn 1914-17. Comd Urmia Force, Persia 1918.) Comd 17 Bde 1939-41; GOC 3 Div 1942-44, I Corps and NG Force 1944, II Corps 1944-45. Manufacturers' agent and company director; of Melbourne; b. Morwell, Vic, 26 Jun 1890. Died 15 May 1954.

from experience rather than study, and was based on a wide and sympathetic knowledge of men in battle. Because of his short stature and heavy build he was affectionately nicknamed "Tubby".

Savige had returned from the previous war late and had had to struggle to re-establish himself in civil life, eventually founding a successful business in the city of Melbourne. This experience, combined with his warm and sympathetic nature, made him a leader in the Legacy Club movement. He also found time to serve in the militia in which, in 1935, he was appointed to command the 10th Brigade. He was a skilful manager of men, using an easy friendly manner and a slanginess of speech to decrease the distance that separated him from his subordinates. He was a sage leader in battle whose approach to all problems was practical and objective. He could write clearly and interestingly and enjoyed writing, whether it was orders and doctrine for future operations or accounts of past battles; he had a sense of history and the doings of his commands were usually more fully recorded than those of companion formations.

The third brigadier, Morshead, was by 1918 standards the senior of the three. He had been a young captain at the landing on Gallipoli, had commanded a battalion from April 1916 onwards, and for seven years had been a brigade commander in the militia. Before the war of 1914-18 he had been a schoolmaster, and after it became a branch manager of the Orient Line, but continued to devote himself to spare-time soldiering with keen enthusiasm.[7] To each brigade was allotted a regular officer as its brigade major: I. R. Campbell,[8] to the 16th Brigade, B. W. Pulver[1] to the 17th, and (in January 1940) A. R. Garrett[2] to the 18th.

Blamey chose to command his artillery E. F. Herring,[3] a leading Melbourne barrister who had served with distinction in the British Army in the previous war, having been a Rhodes Scholar at Oxford when it began. Herring had joined the militia in 1922, and for ten years had commanded artillery regiments.

When the brigadiers began to choose commanding officers for their units they found among their fellow officers some hesitation due to a conviction that the new division was merely the nucleus of a wartime "regular" army and no more likely to go abroad than were the militia formations. One officer Allen sought as a battalion commander wished to wait until an armoured force was formed; others were on the verge of promotion to the command of brigades in the militia and were unwilling

[7] For a character sketch of this leader, see Vol III, which describes the two Middle East campaigns in which he led an Australian division.

[8] Maj-Gen I. R. Campbell, CBE, DSO, VX21. BM 16 Inf Bde 1939-41; CO 2/1 Bn 1941; Comd AIF Reception Gp UK 1945. Regular soldier; of Moss Vale, NSW; b. Moss Vale, 23 Mar 1900.

[1] Brig B. W. Pulver, CBE, DSO, VX14. BM 17 Inf Bde 1939-40; DADOS 6 Div 1940-41; AA&QMG 9 Div 1941-42; DA&QMG I Corps and NG Force during 1944 and II Corps 1944-45. Regular soldier; of Newcastle, NSW; b. Maitland, NSW, 12 Sep 1897.

[2] Lt-Gen Sir Ragnar Garrett, KBE, NX346. BM 18 Inf Bde 1940; CO 2/31 Bn 1940-41; GSO 1 (Ops) I Corps 1943; BGS II Corps 1944-45; CGS 1958-60. Regular soldier; of Perth, WA; b. Northam, WA, 12 Feb 1900.

[3] Lt-Gen Hon Sir Edmund Herring, KCMG, KBE, DSO, MC, VX15. (1914-18: RFA in France and Macedonia.) CRA 6 Div 1939-41; GOC 6 Div 1941-42, NT Force 1942, II Corps 1942, I Corps and NG Force 1942-43, I Corps 1943-44. Chief Justice of Vic since 1944, Lt-Gov since 1945. Of Melbourne; b. Maryborough, Vic, 2 Sep 1894.

to accept battalions in the new force; one failed in the medical test (but passed a later test and served through four arduous campaigns). In Victoria, Savige decided that he would recommend three commanding officers who had seen active service, including one from the cavalry (for which no place had been provided in the new division except in the mechanised reconnaissance regiment—the equivalent of the divisional cavalry of 1914) and one who belonged to the new generation. Morshead, a Sydney man, had the difficult task of selecting commanding officers from the less populous States, and consequently men whom he was not likely to know personally.

Finally, of the twelve battalion commanders chosen, eight had served in the first A.I.F. and four had been too young to do so. The upper age limit of 45 for lieut-colonels was not strictly observed and the ages of a number of officers in lower ranks also exceeded the limits that had been set, sometimes because no other suitable applicants were available. To have strictly observed the limits would have excluded practically all majors and captains who had served in 1914-18, yet some of the unit commanders wished to have two or three such officers to provide a leaven of experience. The oldest battalion commander, for example, was J. W. Mitchell[4] who at 26 had commanded the 8th Battalion in France and who at 48 was given the 2/8th to form; the youngest was J. E. G. Martin,[5] 35, appointed to form the 2/9th (Queensland) Battalion. Command of the mechanised reconnaissance regiment, later to be named the divisional cavalry regiment, was given to M. A. Fergusson,[6] 43, who had served in the artillery in the First A.I.F. and in 1939 commanded a light horse regiment in Victoria. Two out of the four artillery commanders first chosen were too young to have served in the last A.I.F. The commanding officers of the technical arms were citizen soldiers who had served in the last war and who had relevant professional qualifications. The senior engineer officer was C. S. Steele,[7] a consulting engineer of Melbourne in civil life; the chief signals officer, J. E. S. Stevens,[8] a senior officer in the Postmaster-General's Department. N. B. Loveridge,[9] who was appointed to command the Army Service Corps was a militiaman who had been a subaltern in the corps on Gallipoli in 1915.

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[4] Col J. W. Mitchell, DSO, VX40. (1st AIF: CO 8 Bn 1917-18.) CO 2/8 Bn 1939-41; Comd Aust Recruit Traing Centre 1943-44. Company director; of Melbourne; b. Warracknabeal, Vic, 16 Mar 1891.

[5] Brig J. E. G. Martin, CBE, DSO, QX6049. CO 2/9 Bn 1939-41; Comd 19 Inf Bde 1943-45. Civil engineer; of Rockhampton, Qld; b. Brisbane, 17 Apr 1904.

[6] Brig M. A. Fergusson, DSO, MC, VX23. (1st AIF: Gnr 3 Bty AFA and Lt 4 Div Arty.) CO 6 Cav Regt 1939-41; Comd 2 Armd Bde 1942-44, 2 Inf Bde 1944, 8 Inf Bde 1944-45. Farmer; of Whittlesea, Vic; b. Melbourne, 5 Dec 1895.

[7] Maj-Gen Sir Clive Steele, KBE, DSO, MC, VX19. (1st AIF: Lt 5 and 6 Fd Coys Engrs.) CRE 6 Div 1939-40; CE I Corps 1940-42; E-in-C LHQ 1942-45. Consulting engineer; of Melbourne; b. Canterbury, Vic, 30 Sep 1892. Died 5 Aug 1955.

[8] Maj-Gen Sir Jack Stevens, KBE, CB, DSO, MSM, VX17. (1st AIF: Spr 2 Div Sig Coy and Lt Aust Corps Sig Coy.) Comd 6 Div Sigs 1939-40, 21 Inf Bde 1940-42; GOC 4 Div 1942, NT Force 1942-43, 12 Div 1942-43, 6 Div 1943-45. Public servant; of Melbourne; b. Daylesford, Vic, 7 Sep 1896.

[9] Col N. B. Loveridge, OBE, NX10. (1st AIF: DAQMG Anzac Mounted Div 1916-17; Comd Anzac Mounted Div Train 1917-18.) Comd 6 Div AASC 1939-41; DDS&T Second Army 1942-43. Grazier; of Scone, NSW; b. Drummoyne, NSW, 13 Jan 1890.

Blamey chose as his senior staff officer or "G.1" (first-grade general staff officer) Lieut-Colonel Rowell, who has been mentioned earlier. Rowell's service in the previous war had been brief; he had been invalided to Australia after six months' service as a subaltern in a light horse regiment on Gallipoli. Between the wars he graduated at the Staff College in England and was the first Duntroon man to attend the Imperial Defence College, training ground of future senior commanders.[1] He was clear and incisive in thought, sensitive in feeling, frank and outspoken in his approach to men and to problems. Five recent years of service either at English staff colleges or on exchange duty made it probable that wherever he went his opposite numbers in British formations would be men with whom he had previously worked and played. The Assistant Adjutant and Quartermaster-General, or senior administrative officer of the division was Colonel G. A. Vasey,[2] who had served as an artillery officer and later as a brigade major in the First A.I.F. in 1915-18, graduated at the Staff College at Quetta in 1930, and spent more than two years with the Indian Army from 1934 to 1937. Highly strung, thrustful, hard working, Vasey concealed a deeply emotional even sentimental nature behind a mask of laconic and blunt speech. Although he was appointed to head the administrative staff there burned within him a desire to lead Australians as a commander. Both he and Rowell were not only efficient soldiers but men of commanding temperament and wide talent.[3]

So intricate was the equipment problem facing the new force that to generalise about it too broadly can be misleading. During the years of shortage such generalisation was the fashion among publicists and politicians who sought a simple answer to a complex situation. One critic would discover that the panacea was the dive-bomber, another that the Allied armies needed only more tanks to win an early victory, or a larger anti-tank gun, or new tactics, or more fighter aircraft, or more "Tommy guns". These suggested solutions overlooked the fact which soldiers had for years been underlining, that to face a German army, for example, on equal terms, a force must have a large variety of weapons, vehicles and other equipment. A commander might have tanks and guns in plenty, but for lack of telephone wire, or water waggons, or spare parts for motor trucks, or bridging material, the battle could be lost.

Since the early years of the century a basic principle of defence agreements between the members of the British Commonwealth was that they

[1] The following Australian soldiers had attended this college between 1928 and 1939: Lavarack, Wynter, Sturdee, Northcott, Rowell, Bridgeford. In 1928 Mr F. G. Shedden, later Secretary of the Defence Department, also attended the course.

[2] Maj-Gen G. A. Vasey, CB, CBE, DSO, VX9. (1st AIF: 2 Div Arty and BM 11 Inf Bde.) AA&QMG 6 Div 1939-41; GSO1 6 Div 1941; Comd 19 Inf Bde 1941; GOC 6 Div 1942, 7 Div 1942-44. Regular soldier; of Melbourne; b. Malvern, Vic, 29 Mar 1895. Killed in aeroplane crash 5 Mar 1945.

[3] The principal appointments to the staff of the 6 Div by 30 Nov 39 were: *GOC* Lt-Gen Sir T. A. Blamey; *GSO1* Col S. F. Rowell; *GSO2* Maj R. G. H. Irving; *GSO3* Capts C. C. F. Spry and A. G. Oldham; *Cipher Offr* Lt R. R. Vial; *AA&QMG* Lt-Col G. A. Vasey; *DAAG* Maj C. E. M. Lloyd; *DAQMG* Maj E. W. Woodward; *Camp Comdt* Capt I. G. Webster; *Legal Staff Offr* Capt W. M. W. Irvine; *ADMS* Col S. R. Burston; *DADOS* Maj A. S. Wilson; *DAPM* Capt G. C. Hawker; *CRE* Lt-Col C. S. Steele; *CO Sigs* Lt-Col J. E. S. Stevens; *CO ASC* Lt-Col N. B. Loveridge.

should organise and equip their forces similarly. In effect this meant that the Dominions should adopt British equipment and organisation because Britain alone carried out the research and experiment upon which changes could be founded, and this they had largely done. In 1939, however, the British Army was in process of discarding her 1918 weapons and re-equipping with new weapons of almost every category. This re-equipment necessitated a radical reorganisation of the division and this had been carried out in some regular divisions of the British Army. In Australia, however, the organisation of the fighting units differed in only minor respects from that of 1918. The problem which faced the staff was whether to adopt the new organisation in the hope that, later, the force would receive the new equipment, or to adhere to the old organisation, under which Australia could provide most of her own needs—a problem complicated by the fact that Australia had offered to equip the first brigade group of the new force herself, while the remainder were to be equipped from British factories. The final decision was a compromise: to adopt some features of the new organisation and retain some of the old. For example, each of the three infantry brigades at the outset included four battalions, not three as in the new British Army. In consequence of this and other differences between the Australian and British organisation the establishment of the 6th Division was 16,528, which was 3,336 more than that of a British division.

A second problem was one which had faced the staff in 1914, namely to organise a division in which quotas of all arms were provided by each State. This was done by following closely the organisation of the 1st Division of the First A.I.F. Thus the 16th Brigade, like the 1st Brigade of 1914, was to consist of four battalions raised in N.S.W., the 2/1st, the 2/2nd, 2/3rd and 2/4th, the prefix 2/ distinguishing them from the 1st, 2nd, 3rd and 4th Battalions, which were among the N.S.W. battalions of the militia and to which belonged the Battle Honours of the corresponding units of the old A.I.F.[4] The 17th Brigade (2/5th, 2/6th, 2/7th and 2/8th Battalions) was to be recruited in Victoria. In the 18th Brigade, the 2/9th Battalion and two companies of the 2/12th were to be recruited in Queensland, the 2/10th in South Australia, the 2/11th in Western Australia and the remainder of the 2/12th in Tasmania.[5] The recruiting of the reconnaissance regiment, the artillery and other arms were allotted similarly among the States, an unwieldy procedure but one which local sentiment demanded.[6]

It was decided that the shoulder patch of each unit should be identical with that of the equivalent unit in the First A.I.F., but with a narrow

[4] Where no corresponding unit existed in the First AIF the prefix 2 was not used at the outset, e.g. 1st Anti-Tk Regt, 1st AGH, 1st Anti-Aircraft Regt. Eventually, however, all AIF units were prefixed by the 2 to avoid confusion with militia units. The practice has generally been followed in this history of using the prefix with all AIF units which later came to be so known.

[5] In the 1st Div of the First AIF half the 12 Bn was recruited in Tas and the other half in WA and SA. The change was made in the Second AIF because of the relatively greater increase in the population of Queensland between the wars.

[6] For example, in the Western Command, which had a population of only 470,000 and whose quota was 1,343, no fewer than 16 units or parts of units were raised, including such details as 59 offrs and men for the 2/1 MG Bn, 26 for the reconnaissance regt, and 36 for the 2 Gen Hosp.

border of grey cloth to distinguish the new units from similarly numbered units of the militia. Later another outward sign of membership of the A.I.F. was added—the word "Australia" in metal at the outer edge of each shoulder strap.

Nevertheless, beyond the system of numbering described above, the shoulder patch, and an instruction that commanders of A.I.F. units were to choose their officers from certain groups of militia units (thus avoiding competition) no effective link was established between the A.I.F. and the home army, with unhappy results that became apparent within a few weeks and were to persist until the end of the war. When describing the mutinies that followed the disbandment of Australian battalions in the previous war, Bean[7] recorded that General White always strongly wished that it had been possible to tie the A.I.F. battalions to the corresponding regiments of the citizen forces in Australia, "so that the home regiment fed battalions or even companies overseas as in the New Zealand." It was perhaps surprising that commanders and staffs, generally so anxious to follow British military tradition, should again have discarded the British regimental system whereby the number of battalions in each regiment was increased or decreased as the occasion demanded, but each new battalion inherited the history of and was formed and maintained by an historic regiment.

Although, in the 6th Division of 1939, the old organisation was followed in that the brigades had four battalions, the individual battalions were ordered to adopt the British shape soon after their formation. Thus, at the outbreak and after, Lieut-Colonel Cook's[8] 5th Battalion of the militia at South Melbourne consisted of a headquarters wing which was chiefly administrative, two rifle companies, equipped also with a light machine-gun to each platoon, and a support company which included a platoon armed with mortars and two armed with Vickers machine-guns. But, after the first few weeks, the 2/5th Battalion, which Cook was chosen to command, consisted of a headquarters company of six platoons (signals, mortar, carrier, pioneer, anti-aircraft, and transport and administrative), and four rifle companies each of three platoons, each of three sections. Eventually, when the weapons were available, each section would possess one of the new Bren light machine-guns, a lighter, more accurate and more rugged weapon than the Lewis; each platoon would have, in addition, a 2-inch mortar and one of the new single-shot anti-tank rifles firing a ½-inch bullet. The mortar platoon would be armed with two 3-inch mortars, the carrier platoon with ten carriers armed with Brens.

Another innovation was the addition to the division of the mechanised cavalry regiment, mentioned above, which was to be equipped with forty-four carriers and twenty-eight light tanks, the carriers armed each with a

[7] C. E. W. Bean, *Official History of Australia in the War of 1914-18*, Vol VI (1942), p. 940.
[8] Col T. P. Cook, CBE, VX44. (1914-18: RSM 8 Bn AIF and Capt Indian Army.) CO 2/5 Bn 1939-40; Comd Tobruk L of C Sub Area 1941. Bank valuer; of Camberwell, Vic; b. Bendigo, Vic, 8 Sep 1892.

Bren and an anti-tank rifle, the tanks each with a heavy and a medium machine-gun—a belt-fed gun firing a .303 bullet.

The artillery units also were reorganised to conform with the new British tables. Whereas the militia artillery "brigades" included two batteries of 18-pounder guns and one of 4.5-inch howitzers, the new units would be called "regiments"[1] and consist of two batteries each of twelve of the new 25-pounders which could do the work both of gun and howitzer. Pending the arrival of the new guns an alternative organisation provided that each battery of the Australian regiments included eight 18-pounders and four howitzers. The division included also an anti-tank regiment, to be equipped with 2-pounder guns. To carry its heavy equipment, its stores and ammunition, each division was to have 3,163 vehicles, including 349 30-cwt and 206 3-ton lorries. Australia could raise and train a division on the new model but only partly equip it out of local resources.

[1] The use of the words "regiment" and "brigade" in the British Army has long been a cause of misunderstanding to laymen in British countries and to soldiers abroad. Outside British countries the practice is almost universal of describing the unit in all arms as a battalion, the group of three battalions as a regiment. But in the British armies a unit of artillery or cavalry is described as a regiment, a group of three battalions as a brigade. The meaning of the word "regiment" in the British Army is further extended to denote the elastic organisation from which each British unit draws its traditions and its recruits. Thus the "2/Black Watch" means the second battalion of the Royal Highland Regiment.

CHAPTER 3

THE VOLUNTEERS

PERPLEXING questions faced the young Australian in the last months of 1939. If he enlisted in the "special" force would it ever leave Australia, or would it remain on garrison duty—a dreary prospect for those adventurous spirits who would leap at the chance of oversea service? Were armies out-dated and would the war be "won by machines"? The Labour party, which in 1914 had backed the dispatch of an expeditionary force, now opposed it, and about half the population supported that party and listened attentively to its leaders. The Government had shown itself to be hesitant about raising a force free to go overseas, and had placed difficulties in the way of the enlistment of fully-experienced artisans and certain professional men. The call to the militia, in which had assembled 80,000 of the keenest citizens, was particularly faint. They were being asked to leave units they knew, and incidentally to accept lower pay in a force which might not offer even the adventure of foreign service. In some militia units officers who had either not volunteered or not been chosen for the special force were advising the men not to join it, saying that if they wished to serve abroad they would probably go just as soon if they remained in their own units.

Both the Ministers and the press, however, seemed to be convinced that there would be an embarrassingly large rush to enlist. "If Mr Menzies had announced its (the Government's) intention to enlist two divisions instead of one," the *Sydney Morning Herald* said, "he would more clearly have interpreted the nation's wishes." And, in Parliament on 17th September, Mr Street expressed the opinion that far more men than were needed would come forward. He added:

> Preference for enlistment in this force will be given to the members of the militia who are within the age groups and who comply with the very severe medical standard that will be required. It is not anticipated that, in the whole of the force, more than 20 per cent will be without previous training.[1]

The first task of the Government, Street continued, was to give more training to the militia; the Government of the United Kingdom had recognised that for the present the best contribution that Australia could make was to defend itself. It was essential, he said, that the raising of the special force should not set back the training of the militia. Eventually it was announced that half of the vacancies in the new force would be reserved for militiamen, one quarter for men who had previously served in that or other forces, and one quarter for men from country districts where there had been no opportunities for military training.

The result of the evident indecision among political leaders as to the need for the new force and what its role would be was that none but the most eager spirits enrolled. The resolve to form the new division was

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[1] *Commonwealth Debates*, Vol. 161, p. 677.

announced on 15th September, but the medical examination of recruits did not begin until early in October, though in the previous weeks many men had entered their names at the drill halls or had written letters offering to enlist. In the first three days after recruiting offices opened nearly 3,000 men were accepted in New South Wales, where the quota was 6,300, but thenceforward enlistments decreased day by day, and at the end of the first week there was reason to doubt whether the quota would be filled before November when the new units were to go into camp. By 13th October only 3,400 had been enlisted in New South Wales, and of those nearly one half were without previous military experience and only 1,200 from the militia, which numbered about 25,000 in that State. Yet, in a broadcast on that day Mr Street said that "among those upon whom the burden of war weighs most heavily in Australia today are the men of the militia, their wives and families and their employers" and that "the withdrawal of militiamen from industry had created a serious problem for employers." Such words were not likely to increase the number of recruits for the new force. On 17th October the enlistments for the day in New South Wales numbered only 222 and 1,600 were still needed. There were no brass bands and no banners to lead men to the recruiting offices, but rather a series of obstacles to be overcome. One man[2] who had driven from west of the Darling River in New South Wales to enlist at the nearest recruiting office later wrote his recollections of the day.

Coonamble (he wrote) had not been thrown off its balance by the war, or by the fact that men were arriving to enlist there. Bill and I strolled round the town and eventually and inevitably came to rest in a stock and station agent's office. Coonamble abounds in such offices, so we were able to pick and choose, and the night wore on with talk about the rain, the flies and the wool prices. Just a home from home.

There was not a throng at the Town Hall next morning at 10 o'clock. But I met a man who had driven in to enlist, was desperately keen to get in but feared he wouldn't be accepted. By this time the general atmosphere of unconcern, the Prime Minister's speeches telling everyone to carry on, and the decidedly "carry-on" attitude of most of the people I met had had its effect on me. At Walgett, when Bill said I was going in to enlist, the response was such that I began to imagine people looking at me with a surprised air. In Coonamble Bob's girl had raised her eyebrows and said: "But why?" I was beginning to feel half-hearted about it when I met this man who, although barred from enlistment by the fact that he was married and had two children and by virtue of his occupation also, intended to scheme his way into what he described as "the best life you can get."

Eventually the Town Hall opened for business. A handful of men of all descriptions was waiting outside. When the time arrived I went through the door into a long and sombre hall, in the centre of which two men sat at a long table. One of them was in uniform and the other in plain clothes. As the civilian was talking to a prospective soldier, I approached the man in uniform.

"Name?" he asked. "Age?" "Twenty-nine." "Occupation?" "Overseer." The military man gave a quick look at the man opposite and then at me. "Don't speak so loud," he said. "Do you want to join this army?" "Well, I'm not a fanatic, but I've come a long way. Yes, I suppose I do." "Well, you're in a reserved occupation. If you want

[2] L. M. Long (of Goodooga, NSW) later Capt 2/3 Bn.

to get in, you'd better give your occupation as something else." He spoke in a low voice so that the man in plain clothes did not hear.

"I don't want to be hauled up for perjury. What is this force likely to do?"

"You'll probably go to Singapore," replied the officer. "I can assure you that this will be the best force they will form—best equipped and trained. I'd have a go at it if I were you. Later on you might be dragged into a show not half so good."

"Put my occupation down as a bookkeeper," I said.

"Right. Now, any wounds or scars?" And so on, until he finished with me, and I and the partly-filled-in forms went over to the solemn figure across the table.

"Umm, bookkeeper, eh?" he said. "How many work on the place?"

"About sixteen."

"What does the executive staff consist of?"

"There is a manager in charge."

"Is he always there?"

"Most times."

"Does he know you are here today, and why you have come?"

So the cross-questioning went on. I was determined not to tell a deliberate lie, and we both sparred with words. Then the manpower officer blinked behind his spectacles, held his pencil poised above the sheet for a few seconds in visible uncertainty. He turned the sheet over. On the left top corner were the words "Reserved Occupation" and a blank, and on the right top corner the words "Not Reserved" and another blank. Suddenly decisive, he moved, and put a cross in the right-hand space.

"Mind you," he said, "this will possibly be altered, and you have to pass the medical test."

"When will I know for certain?"

"Within a week. You will get a notice informing you one way or the other."

"Well, can I get my medical test over? I've got 170 miles to go and it looks like rain."

Indeed, only the most resolute or the most carefree were likely to surmount official barriers and public indifference; yet those obstructions had the effect not only of selecting a force of splendid soldiers in the making, but, when reinforced by a conviction (which seems to have been fairly general) that the people as a whole were not greatly interested in their fate, of deeply influencing the character of the force, and, by accident, breeding a sense of superiority which it never lost. What kind of men enlisted? Were they adventurers, or those brought up in an ardent loyalty to England now threatened by an old enemy, or men bored by humdrum lives, or (as was soon to be charged against them) the unemployed and unskilled in search of occupation—or some of each of these?

A hundred years from today, when Australia has produced a strongly-flowing native culture, and absorption in the affairs of east Asia and the Pacific have made Europe seem more remote, a later generation may be at a loss to understand why Australians (and New Zealanders) volunteered so readily for service half a world away. Nine out of ten of the recruits had been born in Australia of Australian parents, were intensely proud of their national independence and would have fought for it against all comers. But national character forms slowly, and although the Australian had already acquired a temperament, a manner of speech and a physical appearance that distinguished him from the people of the United Kingdom,

and, like other Dominion peoples, had acquired attitudes and habits of thinking that often made the colonial as irritating to the Englishman as the Englishman was puzzling to the colonial, all shared a common culture. In childhood both Englishman and colonial had listened to the same rhymes and legends, read the same books, sung the same songs. The Australian ate plum pudding on Christmas Day, honoured the King, knew the dates of the Norman Conquest, Magna Carta, Trafalgar and Waterloo, and played English games. His books and his theatre came mostly from England. Thence was still drawn a strong contingent of his intellectual and spiritual leaders, and his own scholars sought post-graduate training and experience there. Economic interdependence fostered personal and sentimental links. The resentments and jealousies engendered by knowledge of Britain's considerable financial domination of Australian industry, of Australian public indebtedness to Britain and Britain's cultural authority were weak in comparison with the ties of cherished sentiments.

Reinforcing this common culture was the powerful tradition of the Australian Imperial Force of twenty years before. So high was the prestige of that volunteer army that a desire to qualify for membership of its brotherhood and to march on Anzac Day was to some a strong motive for enlistment. Some men said that they enlisted to escape from uninteresting occupations, dull towns or suburbs, or domestic difficulties—in fact, for adventure; and this motive, mixed with other feelings of duty and of desire for self-enhancement, was undoubtedly powerful in a colonial community where men were often less firmly tied to home than in the old world, and were habitually on the alert for better opportunities in distant places. But the chronicler who follows these men through their training and campaigns must reach the conclusion that most of them were conscious of a peculiarly compelling duty towards the State and their fellow men. One of the new recruits (unable to define exactly why he himself had joined) questioned his companions but found all too shy or reserved to confess a serious reason for enlisting. Finally he decided:

> The men who joined the army were the type who stood up in trams and gave their seats to women. There are people who are constitutionally unable to resist when a call is made, or when they feel they are under some obligation. I doubt whether many of them could tell why they enlisted. The real cause was something deeper than they could fathom. We could not see ourselves as fitting the glowing words of Masefield about the Anzacs at Gallipoli, and, although we were born with a tradition to carry on, and were proud of it, we were only too ready to admit that we were a ragtime army—though woe betide the militia or the civilian who suggested that. There was, I believe, a large body of men—perhaps the majority—who were adventurers at heart but common citizens by force of circumstance—how many of us are not—who saw in this call a glorious combination—the life of an adventurer with the duties of a citizen.

Events were to prove that the division enlisted under these conditions was to contain among its twenty thousand enough potential leaders to officer from top to bottom a force five times as large.

The average age was higher than was expected,[3] a circumstance attributed by some observers partly to the trade depression of the early 'thirties and partly to the confused pacificism of the period between the wars. These had produced a corrosive disillusionment among many of those youths whose characters were shaped in those years and made them cynical to appeals to patriotism. What did they owe to a State which had abandoned them to unemployment in the depression? And in their school days it had been the fashion to teach that wars were the futile outcome of conspiracy between dishonest politicians, soldiers and armament manufacturers—"butchers" and "merchants of death"—and that patriotism was an evil emotion.[4] "Almost all contemporary left-wing writers of this generation and the last attacked the idea of nationalism," wrote Rebecca West, after the war.[5] "It was true that many of these attacks were made under the delusion that the words nationalism and imperialism mean the same thing, whereas nationalism—which means simply a special devotion of a people to its own material and spiritual achievements—implies no desire for the annexation of other territories and enslavement of other peoples. But a great many of these attacks were made under no such apprehension. It was genuinely felt that it was pure superstition which required a man to feel any warmer emotion about his own land, race and people than about any other. Why then should any man feel a lump in his throat when he saw his flag . . . or feel that in a dispute between his people and another he must obey the will of his kin and not aid their enemy?"

There had been enthusiasm among the intellectuals of the left-wing in politics in Australia as in England for the Republican cause in the Spanish Civil War; that conflict exerted a special appeal to young men shaped by the depression and anti-militarist teaching, to whom it was presented as a war of radicals against "the Generals", and thus appealed to

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[3] In Dec 1940 the average age of men of the 2/9 Bn was 27.19, in a unit whose commanding officer had chosen no officers and was unwilling to take privates who had served in 1914-18. The age-grouping of 14,953 men chosen at random from among those who enlisted in 1939 was as shown in the following table:

18-19	20-24	25-29	30-34	35-49
116	6,457	3,851	3,797	732

It is probable that a considerable number of youths of 19 and under gave their ages as 20; recruits in the 20 group were more numerous than those in each of the years 21 to 24. Similarly the 30-34 group probably includes many who were older. In Victoria, for example, only 162 of the first 5,000 gave their ages as over 35, yet there seem to have been more than 162 soldiers of the 1914 war—men in their forties and fifties—in Victorian units formed in 1939. Exactly 200 of the 14,953 men stated that they were unemployed, but this figure is probably not significant, because men in lucrative employment are known to have said that they were unemployed to avoid manpower restrictions, and some who were unemployed are likely to have stated their usual occupations. In every unit a small number of men who had served in the First AIF managed to enlist by understating their ages and omitting to mention their previous military experience. In May 1940 there were four last-war officers and twenty-one other ranks in the 2/6 Bn, for example, three and thirteen in the 2/8. The proportion of veterans appears to have been higher in units of the medical and other special services.

[4] This outlook was expressed in the following passages from an article by N. E. Lee, a schoolmaster, on "History and Educational Reform" in *Historical Studies*, Oct 1944: "The folklore which rationalises this anti-Christian religion of nationalism finds its strongest expression in scissors-and-paste history, in which international relations become a glamorous drama played out by personalised abstractions called *Britain* and *France* and *Germany* which *think* and *feel* and *fling their troops* on each other as if they were homogeneous and self-conscious entities. The effect of this is merely to saddle the masses of the people in a country with the crimes committed by their own birds of prey—the feudal-militarist-capitalist ruling classes, the members of which consciously or unconsciously chose the path to war to divert attention from the struggle for reform within their own countries."

[5] In "The Meaning of Treason", *Harper's Magazine*, Oct 1947.

sympathetic readers of both Lenin and Erich Maria Remarque. But the Munich Agreement, the defeat of the Republicans in Spain and the pact between Russia and Germany had disillusioned and bewildered such people, and they returned to the attitudes of four years before. A majority of the leaders of this group stood aside from the struggle in places where they could wait and see how it developed. There can be no doubt that these influences, though less strong relatively in Australia than in England, reduced the number of youthful volunteers in 1939 and 1940, and caused the proportion of men in their thirties and early forties in the A.I.F. of those years to be relatively high.

It is probable that news of plans to institute a large-scale Empire Air Training Scheme caused many young men who might otherwise have joined the A.I.F. to hang back in the hope of entering the air force. Had not the Prime Minister said that Australia's main contribution would probably be in the air? And, in fact, within a few months the number of applicants for enlistment in the air force would soon far outnumber those enlisted in the A.I.F.

One of the reasons why the army leaders had not been in haste to enlist the new force was that militia units were occupying practically all the hutted encampments the army possessed, and new huts had to be built for the A.I.F. A camp for the 17th (Victorian) Brigade group, that is to say the infantry brigade of four battalions plus its normal share of artillery, engineer and other units, was constructed at Puckapunyal near Seymour, another for the 16th (New South Wales) Brigade at Ingleburn, near Liverpool, and a third, for the 18th at Greta in the Hunter River Valley. This third camp was not begun until late in November and the 18th Brigade was not concentrated until December; in the meantime most of these troops were under canvas in their own States. Before the camps were ready, the newly-appointed leaders had begun to form their units. They had to select at least a nucleus of officers and N.C.O's, prepare to receive large batches of recruits when the huts were ready, and assemble enough equipment to enable the men to be fed and bedded. During October several thousand recruits were sent to depots established by the area commanders at existing military camps to undergo training before the new camps were ready. On 3rd November advance parties of the 16th and 17th Brigades were to be in camp to prepare to receive drafts both from the training depots and the recruiting centres.

A particularly detailed record exists of the formation of the 2/2nd Battalion. It came into being at 9 a.m. on 24th October when the commanding officer, Lieut-Colonel Wootten,[6] a country solicitor who had formerly been a regular soldier, established his headquarters at Victoria Barracks in Sydney and enlisted an adjutant (whom he had chosen from the militia), a quartermaster and a regimental sergeant-major (from the regular forces). The following day he interviewed and enlisted two captains

[6] Maj-Gen Sir George Wootten, KBE, CB, DSO, NX7. (1st AIF: 1 Bn and BM 11 and 9 Inf Bdes.) CO 2/2 Bn 1939-40; Comd 18 Inf Bde 1941-43; GOC 9 Div 1943-45. Solicitor; of West Wyalong and Mosman, NSW; b. Marrickville, NSW, 1 May 1893.

and six lieutenants, and in the next two days two majors and an orderly room sergeant were added. One of the majors, I. N. Dougherty,[7] had given up his militia rank of lieut-colonel which he had attained two months before at the uncommonly early age of 32.

On 2nd November the 2/2nd Battalion consisted of twelve officers, two sergeant-majors, one sergeant and forty-one privates from the militia, and these marched into Ingleburn, where they spent the following day attempting to remedy defects in the new camp and finding cooks to feed the drafts that would arrive next day. Some of the newcomers were to arrive from city and suburban drill halls; others were on their way from the Northern Rivers and Newcastle in a crowded and uproarious troop train.

> There were sleeper-cutters and timber-getters from the Dorrigo, and cow-cockies and banana-growers from the valley of the Tweed. There were business men and tradesmen from cities like Newcastle, Grafton and Armidale. There were station owners and station hands from the frosty New England. There were school teachers and bank clerks from practically anywhere. And there was a sprinkling of plain hobos . . . . Every man Jack had had a "send-off" and some had been almost poured aboard the train as it left their home town . . . . They sang lustily and every town passed was a signal for vociferous calls and cheers. Bunting in the form of toilet paper startled mild-mannered churchgoers as it streamed from every window as the train sped through the outer suburbs of Sydney. Several gentlemen amused themselves between Gosford and Hornsby by climbing from window to window along the side of the train. They streamed off the train at Ingleburn carrying suit cases, sugar bags and every conceivable kind of dunnage.[8]

The 2/2nd Battalion received ninety men that day and 304 the next. Cries of "You'll be sorry" greeted each draft. The new arrivals were issued with blankets, palliasses and straw, but, for the time, that was all there was to distribute. All had been warned to bring eating utensils and to wear working clothes. Some of the militiamen wore uniforms, but the coats, shirts, trousers and hats of the other recruits were almost as varied as their occupations. On 6th November 384 officers and men arrived from the recruit training depots, bringing the battalion's strength to 17 officers (14 more were needed) and 815 other ranks (7 above the "establishment").

It was not surprising that defects were found in camps so hurriedly built. As the first batches of recruits arrived at Ingleburn, carpenters and plumbers were still at work, and road graders were raising a haze of red dust. A report on the condition of this camp on 3rd November stated that roads were unformed, electrical appliances were incomplete, mess tables had been condemned by the engineers, horse lines were not fixed, and there were no stables or harness rooms. Kitchens and meat houses were not flyproof; orderly room staffs used butter boxes as chairs and packing cases as tables, and were making shelves with such timber as

[7] Maj-Gen I. N. Dougherty, CBE, DSO, NX148. CO 2/4 Bn 1940-42; Comd 23 Inf Bde 1942, 21 Inf Bde 1942-45. School teacher, of Armidale, NSW; b. Leadville, NSW, 6 Apr 1907.

[8] Lt K. F. Curtis in *Nulli Secundus Log* (1946).

they could find. From both Ingleburn and Puckapunyal went complaints that the drainage was inefficient and kitchens and meat houses not hygienic.

Although the Government had decided that half of the new force should be drawn from the militia, it was apparent that militia enlistments would fall far short of that proportion. Some commanding officers of the militia appeared anxious lest they be left with too few experienced junior leaders to carry on training efficiently during the coming three months in camp. In this they considered that they were supported by a direction of the Military Board that militiamen were not to be allowed to enlist if, as a result, their units would be unduly weakened. Fewer than ten men enlisted from some militia battalions; only one officer volunteered from one Melbourne battalion, only one from one Queensland battalion; it was noticeable that, as a rule, the largest number of officers and men volunteered from those battalions whose commanders had themselves been appointed to the A.I.F.[1] In New South Wales on 30th October 3,018 of the new recruits were without military experience, 1,468 had previous experience but had not come directly from the militia, only 1,634 were from the militia.

Sir Henry Gullett considered the low rate of enlistment from the militia —partly an outcome of the unfortunate difficulty of creating any effective link between militia and expeditionary force—sufficiently serious to raise at a meeting of the War Cabinet on 28th October when recruiting was already beginning to wane. He said that officers were discouraging enlistment, evidently believing that a later division would be raised in which they would hold commands and take their men with them. Mr Street replied that he considered that this attitude was "not prevalent", the real obstacle being lack of certainty of overseas service. The shortage of recruits from the militia, and particularly of officer volunteers, caused General Blamey such concern that he addressed a complaint to the Secretary of the Military Board, and suggested that steps be taken to counteract what he described as "deliberate passive resistance to the policy of the Government." He proposed that commanders who had failed to cooperate be informed that they would not be considered for promotion, that his recruiting officers be authorised to visit militia parades and accept volunteers without interference and that, if units still failed to respond, a proportion of their officers be drafted to those that had been depleted by enlistments in the A.I.F. The diary of I Australian Corps gave the following reasons why, finally, only 20 to 25 per cent of the new force—fewer than 5,000—instead of 50 per cent came from the militia: "*(a)* Absence of an inspiring lead by the Commonwealth Government; *(b)* reluctance on the part of many members of the militia to relinquish well-paid

[1] On the other hand, up to the end of November, the highest number of volunteers provided by any unit, 179, came from a Queensland battalion, the 15th (Lt-Col P. V. O. Fleming); and Queensland was the first State to fill its quota in the new force. In Victoria notable exceptions to the rule were the 46 Bn (Lt-Col H. H. Carr) and the Melbourne University Rifles (Lt-Col F. N. Balfe) which produced high percentages of volunteers.

positions to join a force which might not go overseas; *(c)* opposition, both active and passive, by commanders of militia formations and units."[2]

However, so far as officers were concerned the shortage was a result partly of the fact that commanding officers offered appointments to only a proportion of those who volunteered, preferring to go short until they could select potential leaders from the fine material among the men and in view of this Blamey's criticism was too harsh. For example, only about one half of the officers from the Victorian militia battalions who had volunteered were found suitable for the 17th Brigade.[3] Even in January the battalions of that brigade still lacked officers, the 2/7th having only eighteen instead of thirty-four, the 2/5th only twenty-one. In the 16th Brigade the 2/3rd still lacked twelve officers. The vacancies were filled in February and March chiefly by promotion from the ranks. One possible source from which highly-trained junior officers could have been drawn was the Staff Corps, and the Royal Military College into which entries had been greatly increased in 1938 and 1939. But of fifty-seven (excluding New Zealanders) who graduated from the college in December 1939 it was regrettable that only four were posted to the 6th Division.

The decision to keep militia units in training had the effect of reducing the number of regular instructors and the quantity of equipment available to the new force, because the militia units were employing many instructors and using most of the equipment. The Military Board in October issued an instruction that the A.I.F. be given priority in equipment, but militia formations offered considerable opposition to handing it over. For example, the 16th Brigade had been in camp for a fortnight before it received even rifles. At the end of November some men still had not even working dress and fewer than half had uniforms.[4] A quota of instructors

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[2] After the war the then CO of the engineers of the 6 Div, Lt-Col (later Maj-Gen) C. S. Steele, wrote, concerning the raising of his unit:
"The call to arms of the Prime Minister referred *inter alia* to a just peace, no profiteering, and manpower restrictions which prevented everybody joining the A.I.F. except, as I remember it, stockbrokers and certain classes of unemployed. Professional soldiers were debarred from enlisting. Under these circumstances only the ultra loyal, many of whom are stated to have enlisted under an assumed name or calling, were available. The difficulties were great. I started to select the five officers for the 2/2 Fd Coy. I had a parade of 55 engineer officers of 3 and 4 Div (CMF) at Batman Avenue and suitably addressed them. Two volunteered (Lts J. G. Wilson and S. G. Pinniger). With the help of General Sir Thomas Blamey I had Capt H. M. Whitford (professional RAE) appointed to command. I was fortunate in obtaining W. S. Cantelo (R of O) and P. R. Gilmour (R of O) who sent me cablegrams imploring me to keep them a 'guernsey'. They paid their expenses back to Australia from South Africa and Christmas Island respectively. I was also able to get Beckingsale, a 4th year engineering student with a commission in the MUR, to enlist under 'unemployed'. I also got D. O. Muller who was at Maribyrnong under Leighton by means which even now I would not like to commit to writing. I had reasonable response in New South Wales and selected among others Torr, Hay, Chester, Davey and from the other States Risson, Gehrmann, McGowan, Overall, Westlund and others. I must say at this stage that though the numbers were small I got the adventurous type who were to be very great and loyal leaders in the years to come. They were the brains, heart and backbone of the Royal Australian Engineers."
(Up to Aug 1945 the ranks attained and decorations won by these captains and lieutenants were: Col J. G. Wilson, OBE, Maj S. G. Pinniger, Maj H. M. Whitford (KIA Bardia 5 Jan 41), Lt-Col W. S. Cantelo, MC, Maj P. R. Gilmour, MC, Capt G. Beckingsale, MC, Lt-Col D. O. Muller, DSO, MC, Brig A. G. Torr, CBE, DSO, Lt-Col J. C. Hay, Maj R. R. Chester, Maj W. A. Davey, Brig R. J. H. Risson, DSO, OBE, Lt-Col A. S. Gehrmann, DSO, Col J. M. McGowan, Lt-Col J. W. Overall, MC (CO 1 Aust Para Bn), Lt-Col C. R. Westlund.)

[3] To prevent competition, the commanding officers were each allotted certain militia bns from which to choose their officers, and their recruits came either from those bns or from the areas in which those bns were raised.

[4] Gen Blamey considered that these shortages and the extent to which the area commanders cooperated with the leaders of the new force in overcoming them, affected the pace at which the brigades were formed and trained. At the end of November he considered that the standard of training was in the order: 16, 17, 18 Bdes.

was provided by the attachment of sergeants from the permanent artillery or from the training cadre of the Instructional Corps, but even so it was not uncommon for a subaltern or a sergeant to have to train a platoon single-handed.

By imperceptible stages, however, the civilians became soldiers. In later years the problems that then enmeshed them seemed comical. There were men who, after days in camp, did not know that they now possessed army numbers.[5] "It is understood," said a routine order of early November, "that there are men in this camp who have not yet enlisted." But gradually, acting corporals and acting sergeants were selected; army routine and ritual ceased to be a mystery, and the elements of drill and musketry were learnt. A cotton overall working dress and a crumpled hat of the same material were distributed, which the troops named the "giggle suit" because it seemed to them to resemble the uniform of the inmates of a lunatic asylum; next came the loose-fitting battle-dress—tunic, trousers and cloth gaiters. The diarist of the 16th Brigade, which was the first to receive rifles and machine-guns, wrote after three weeks that "a straggly, non-descript body of men" had developed into "a compact unit".[6] Eagerly the men awaited a decision whether they would be sent abroad and when.

When the Federal Parliament reassembled on 15th November (it had risen on 22nd October) the fate of the new force was warmly debated. First Mr Menzies announced the Cabinet's decision (made on 19th October) that compulsory training for home service be re-introduced from 1st January with the object of maintaining the militia at a strength of not less than 75,000. The first draft to be called up would be unmarried men who became twenty-one in the year ending on 30th June 1940. In support of this proposal to reintroduce conscription for home defence, which had been in abeyance since 1929, the Ministers pointed out that, as a result of enlistments in the A.I.F. and discharges for medical reasons and to reserved occupations, the strength of the militia had been reduced to between 55,000 and 65,000. It was expected that when the decision to release married militiamen after one month's training was carried out another 16,350 would be lost to the militia; and the Second A.I.F. was still more than 3,000 short of its total of 20,000. Mr White[7] (United Australia Party), himself a former battalion commander in the militia, said that enlistments were low because, whereas in 1914 there had been a clear call, today the young men were unwilling to enlist if they were to remain in Australia on five shillings a day. From one militia unit half of

[5] Each Australian soldier's number was prefaced by the initial letter of the State or territory in which he enlisted. If he was a member of the AIF an X was added to this initial and his serial number followed. Generally a low AIF number indicated early enlistment although there were not a few anomalies and exceptions. The numbers of men who enlisted at Darwin in the Northern Territory were prefaced by DX. In the Women's Services the letter F was added, viz: NFX.

[6] Its outline syllabus of 24 days' training for rifle coys, beginning on 7 Nov, was: drill 32 hrs, weapon training 60, bayonet training 6, section leading 60, defence against gas 8, concealment and camouflage 2.

[7] Gp Capt Hon Sir Thomas White, KBE, DFC. (1st AIF: served as capt in 1st Half Flight AFC in Mesopotamia.) Min for Trade and Customs 1933-38. CO RAAF Stn, Bournemouth, Eng, 1941-42; CO RAF Stn Brighton, Eng, 1943. B. North Melbourne, 26 Apr 1888. Died 13 Oct 1957.

those who had enlisted came from the unemployed, he said, and one-quarter of the remainder were unskilled. Mr Ward (Labour), who had spoken with fervour against the proposal to raise an expeditionary force, replied that so long as the dole for unemployed single men was 8s 6d a week, men would enlist merely for the sake of 5s a day with food and quarters. It was "a form of economic conscription," he said.[8] For the next fortnight the Cabinet was under fire both from those who thought Australia was doing too much and those who thought she was not doing enough.

On the day on which the House reassembled the War Cabinet had begun to consider cablegrams from Mr Casey, one of its senior members, who had gone to London to attend a conference of Dominion ministers.[1] In these cablegrams, sent on 5th and 6th November, Casey had reported that the German Army now greatly outnumbered the combined French and British Armies on the Western Front, and the British Chiefs of Staff hoped that, if Germany did not attack in the West during November, there would be no large-scale fighting until April. They considered that immediate danger to Australia was remote, and tentatively suggested that the Australian division be sent to Egypt or Palestine for training as soon as possible, thus relieving British troops there, and that a second Australian division should be formed and sent to the Middle East making an Australian corps. Britain would provide Bren guns and anti-tank guns, but wished the 6th Division to bring its own field guns. On 13th November the Defence Committee recommended that the suggestions concerning the dispatch of the 6th Division and the formation of a new division be adopted, and suggested that the 6th Division should embark in December and January if ships were available. This question was considered on the 15th and 16th November by the War Cabinet, which finally decided to defer a decision until the full Cabinet had discussed the problem.

Meanwhile on 20th November the New Zealand Government informed the United Kingdom Government that it had decided to send the first echelon of its expeditionary force overseas. Immediately Mr Menzies cabled the New Zealand Prime Minister, Mr Savage,[2] that his Government did not wish to be out of step with New Zealand but nevertheless considered that it should watch the developments of the next three or four weeks before deciding to send its division overseas. Menzies said that reasons for delaying decision were the uncertain situation in the Far East, particularly if Germany invaded Holland, and lack of public enthusiasm in Australia because of inactivity on the Western Front and the small size of the British force there. He added:

Another consideration which has puzzled us is that whereas we are finding the greatest possible difficulties in obtaining even a fraction of the shipping needed for

[8] *Commonwealth Debates*, Vol. 162, pp. 1224-5.

[1] Casey had attended conferences in London and, with Gen Northcott, the DCGS, had visited the BEF in France and seen both its lack of equipment and the weakness of the short defensive line it held on the Belgian border.

[2] Rt Hon M. J. Savage. Prime Minister of New Zealand and Minister of External Affairs 1935-40. B. Benalla, Vic, 7 Mar 1872. Died 26 Mar 1940.

some of our export commodities, it seems to be assumed that there would be no difficulty in securing ships and naval convoy for a military force.[3]

On 28th November, however, the full Cabinet decided that the 6th Division should go abroad when it had reached a suitable stage in its training, which it was expected would be early in 1940; but that it was averse to the shipment of "artillery or any other material needed for the maintenance of the militia forces unless it is capable of rapid replacement."[4] No action was taken on the suggestion of the British Chiefs of Staff and the recommendation of the Australian Chiefs that a second division should be formed.

When Mr Menzies announced this decision in the House next day the Opposition attacked it vigorously. Mr. Curtin promptly moved that "this House is of opinion that Australia's manpower is required for the defence and safety of the Commonwealth, and is opposed to the dispatch of expeditionary forces."[5] He recalled that in the previous war it had been the maintenance of a similar volunteer army overseas that had led to the effort to introduce conscription. Mr Ward declared that the 20,000 men in the 6th Division did not represent the full number the Government would send abroad, and added:

> I ask military experts and alleged military experts in this Chamber to tell me whether the sending of 200,000 Australian men into a European battlefield will make any difference to the ultimate success or otherwise of what are known as the Allied forces.[6]

Mr Blackburn (Labour) expressed the opinion that all that could be gained from such a debate was that the world would be made aware that the representatives of half the Australian people were resolutely opposed to the raising of a force for service abroad.

The following day the opposition launched a more embarassing attack. Mr Forde (Labour) moved that a private's pay in the A.I.F. be not less than seven shillings a day and one shilling deferred pay for an unmarried man, with an allowance of three shillings a day for a wife and one shilling and sixpence for each child; and that the pay for an unmarried militia private be eight shillings with the same allowances. At that time, although the volunteer militiaman was being paid eight shillings a day, a rate that had been fixed in 1938 to encourage recruiting, the A.I.F. unmarried private received only five shillings with a promise of an additional shilling deferred pay after embarkation.

Some of the Government's supporters had also spoken against the low rates of the soldiers' pay. On 5th December Mr Menzies announced that

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[3] This correspondence is published in *Documents Relating to New Zealand's Participation in the Second World War, 1939-45,* Vol 1 (War History Branch, Wellington, 1949).

[4] On 22 Dec the War Cabinet decided that sixteen 18-pdr field guns and eight howitzers (enough to arm one field regiment) and 256 Lewis guns should be sent away with the division, but that they should be returned as soon as they could be replaced by the United Kingdom.

[5] *Commonwealth Debates,* Vol. 162, p. 1703.

[6] *Commonwealth Debates,* Vol. 162, p. 1755. Such comment illustrated a widespread lack of understanding, probably shared by members of both parties, of the important part Australia had played in operations of the 1914-18 war and could play in this war. The presence of 200,000 Dominion troops in France, if trained and equipped, would have radically altered the balance there.

the unmarried volunteer militiamen would still receive eight shillings a day for his three months' period of training, after which the militia would pass into reserve "as a reasonably-trained force"; the conscripted militiaman would, however, be paid five shillings a day; the unmarried private in the A.I.F. would be paid five shillings a day in Australia, and an additional two shillings a day deferred pay after embarkation. An additional three shillings a day would be paid to married men and one shilling for each child. The Prime Minister pointed out that these increases would add £900,000 to the cost of the millitia in 1939-40 and £1,000 a day to the cost of maintaining each 20,000 men of the overseas force. He admitted that, for a few months, the volunteer militia private would be paid three shillings more than the A.I.F. private in Australia.

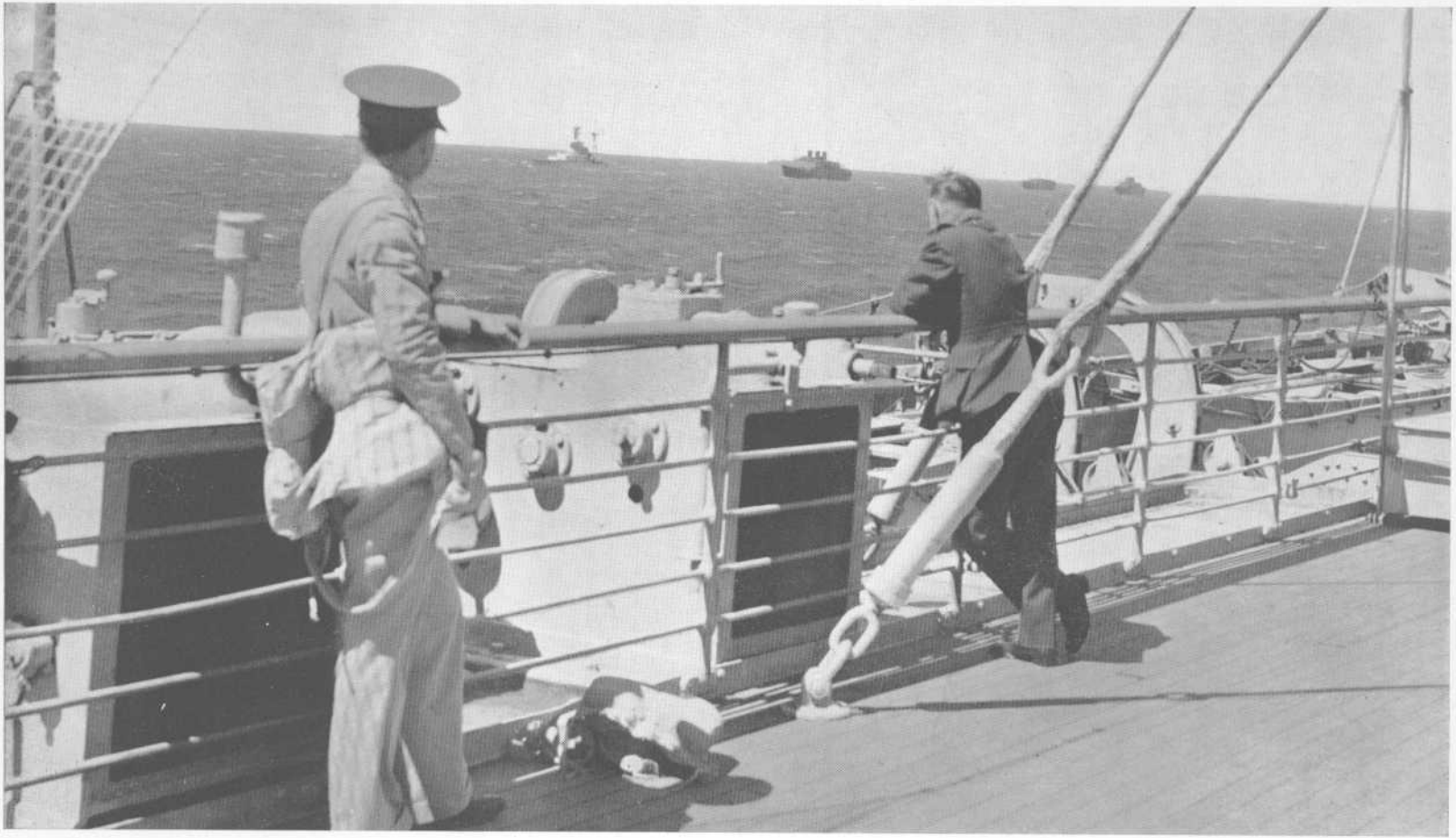
> The decision made by the Government (said Menzies) was made because it considers that the payments to Australian militiamen are not in the nature of wages, but should be fixed having regard to all of our vast commitments in relation to defence and with proper regard to the general circumstances of the country. In other words, the call to military service is a call to patriotism. It is not, and cannot be, a mere business deal, and I believe that no Australian expects it to be.[7]

Enlistment presented no financial problem to most young unmarried men. Particularly was this so to unmarried sergeants and officers, the more provident of whom saved more money in five or six years of service than most civilian workers on wages or salaries save in a similar period, and this was a partial compensation for the loss of experience and promotion they suffered. For the married man, however, response to the "call to patriotism" offered no such comfort. If he was a private the most his wife and, say, one child, could receive was £2 16s a week. The average basic wage was £3 19s and only a fraction of those who enlisted had been used to living on this minimum sum. The soldier who made a maximum allotment to his wife would be left with one shilling a day for himself, about enough to keep a moderate smoker in tobacco and to buy an eighteen-penny air mail stamp each week for a letter to his wife. If the soldier was over 30 he could not hope to rise above the rank of warrant officer.

The rates finally allotted to the Australian soldier were enough to enable the wife and children of a married private to subsist; the rates proposed by the Labour party were higher, but they, too, would have placed the soldier's wife on a few shillings less than the average basic wage.[8]

In retrospect it can be seen that, with this debate on the Government's decision to reintroduce compulsion for the home army and send the A.I.F. abroad, and on soldiers' pay, the long and bitter controversy which had begun with the conscription campaign of 1916 had almost ended. The deeds had been done—conscription for home service had been reintroduced and an Australian force was going overseas—yet the speeches of

[7] *Commonwealth Debates*, Vol. 162, p. 2077.
[8] If the Labour proposals had been accepted and, provided a private was permitted to allot all but 1s a day to his wife, a wife and one child would have received £3 13s 6d a week; actually, in 1940, she could receive £2 16s.



The First Convoy: At sea, January 1940.

(Australian War Memorial photo)



(Australian War Memorial photo)

The Middle East Commanders-in-Chief: Vice-Admiral Sir Andrew Cunningham, Air Marshal Sir Arthur Longmore and General Sir Archibald Wavell.

even the most ardent of the Opposition's shock troops contained little of the rancour that might have been expected by those who recalled the acrimonious debates of ten to twenty years before. Three months later Mr Curtin was to deny emphatically a statement by Mr Menzies in the heat of a by-election campaign that, when Labour was returned to power, it would recall the A.I.F. "We will provide adequately so that the voluntary principle will maintain the first division," he said. "That is definite. The men are there and we will not abandon them, but the question of sending further divisions is one which the electors of Corio have now an opportunity to vote upon. I make it quite clear that Labour is opposed to that being done."[9] Indeed, so far as the A.I.F. which fought in the Middle East is concerned, the differences between the two political groups in Australia pass out of its story at this point. Curtin's statement at the by-election campaign was to be underlined in the following June after the fall of France, when the Labour party's conference resolved on national training for defence, complete participation in the Empire Air Training Scheme, and the reinforcement of the A.I.F. abroad.

In the meantime, even before the men were in uniform, a strong pride—a "defiant pride" one diarist called it—had begun to develop in the new force, stimulated by the coolness which arose between the A.I.F. and the militia and, perversely, by the widespread conviction among men of the A.I.F. that the public believed that the force was composed of the rag-tag and bobtail of the people. Several men of the 16th Brigade have recorded their surprise, when the brigade marched through the streets of Sydney on 4th January, to find the streets lined with cheering people, and to read in the newspapers next day flattering comparisons between the men of the new and the old A.I.F.

> The long khaki-columns (wrote the *Sydney Morning Herald*) thrilled the heart of Sydney as it has not been thrilled for a quarter of a century, since that still spring day in 1914 when the First A.I.F. marched through the same streets on its way to Anzac and imperishable glory . . . the marching was magnificent.

In respect of the quality of the men and of its growing self-esteem the comparisons were justified; in addition the division was slowly gaining in numbers and experience. At the end of November the 16th Brigade had reached 96 per cent of its full strength, although there was still a considerable shortage of officers. Groups of young leaders attended schools and returned from them with higher standards of skill and discipline which they in their turn helped to impart to their units. The opinion of the divisional staff was that, at this stage, the 16th Brigade had reached "a reasonable standard of platoon training." "The standard of efficiency of officers was generally the chief weakness . . . . The material in the ranks was good and reasonably well trained and further progress depended on the capacity of officers."

[9] *Sydney Morning Herald*, 15 Feb 1940.

Wisely perhaps, the commanders made training less intense than became the rule later. For example, week-end leave was frequent and womenfolk were allowed to visit the camps on Sundays. Amenities were few and the lack of them worried some experienced observers who were anxious lest the discipline of the force should suffer because of this. However, the fact that the men were camped near enough to the cities to spend their frequent leaves there, prevented the lack of organised entertainment and non-military education from becoming a pressing deficiency at this stage.[1]

Meanwhile steps were being taken to transfer the force to the Middle East. On 15th December an advance party of an Australian overseas base commanded by Brigadier Morris,[2] and of the 6th Division with Colonel Vasey as the senior officer, the two groups totalling fifty officers and sixty other ranks, had joined a similar party of New Zealanders in the liner *Strathallan* bound for Palestine to reconnoitre a training area and prepare for the reception of the remainder of the force. They were to be followed in January by a convoy containing the 16th Brigade group, the Reconnaissance Regiment, the 2/1st General Hospital and detachments of other units, the whole contingent totalling about 6,600 men.[3]

On the 9th January the men who had straggled up the road into Ingleburn in the early days of November, wearing civilian clothes and carrying their possessions in bundles and suitcases, marched down that road again, uniformed, in threes, keeping step, proud and excited. Their final destination was a well-kept secret—perhaps Singapore, perhaps India, Egypt, Palestine or England—but the fact that the first large body of the Second A.I.F. was about to embark was widely known. As the troop trains travelled through the suburbs housewives waved, and when the liners in which the men were to embark moved into the harbour the foreshores were crowded with onlookers.

The 16th Brigade group embarked in the liners *Otranto, Orcades, Orford* and *Strathnaver,* none of which had been fully converted into troopships

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[1] Nevertheless, at Ingleburn, one allied problem quickly arose. The canteens there were conducted by a private contractor (unlike those at Puckapunyal which were managed by representatives of the Returned Soldiers' League). In mid-November men of the 16 Bde decided that the private canteens were not clean, the prices excessive and the goods of poor quality. On the evening of 20 Nov crowds gathered outside two canteens near the 2/1 Bn's lines. Lt-Col K. W. Eather persuaded one of these crowds to disperse, but someone in the second group set fire to the other canteen—a flimsy booth about fourteen feet wide. The demonstration had barely begun when two cars containing reporters from a Sydney newspaper were on the scene. This convinced Brig Allen that they knew in advance of plans for a demonstration. In spite of a request by Allen that it should not report it, the next day the *Daily Telegraph* published an exaggerated account of the incident—"a story," wrote the diarist of the brigade, "calculated to alarm the public, bring 16 Bde into slanderous disrepute, and start Army Headquarters on an apoplectic heresy hunt." The report was accompanied by a leading article declaring that the incident was "a blot on the good name of the Second AIF." Soon afterwards all canteens were placed under the control of the army with a result that, at Ingleburn, prices of some goods were reduced by about half, and sales increased.

[2] Maj-Gen B. M. Morris, CBE, DSO, VX285. (1st AIF: 55 Aust Siege Bty 1915-17, and 5 Div Arty 1917-18.) Comdt Aust Overseas Base 1940; Aust Mil Liaison Offr India 1940-41; Comdt 8 MD 1941-42; Comd NG Force 1942, Angau 1942-46. Regular soldier; of Upper Beaconsfield, Vic; b. East Melbourne, 19 Dec 1888.

[3] On 4 Jan the War Cabinet decided that three war correspondents would be allowed to accompany the force, two for the morning and one for the evening papers, and that an official correspondent also be appointed. It was decided also to establish a War Records Section. The three newspaper correspondents were Reginald Glennie, Guy Harriott and John Hetherington. In March Kenneth Slessor, poet and journalist, was appointed Official Correspondent. A field unit of the Australian Broadcasting Commission was formed in January, but, evidently because of newspaper pressure, permission to send it away was withdrawn. Eventually it sailed in September.

so they still contained some of the luxuries of peace, and each carried only 1,300 to 1,600 soldiers, not many more than their normal complement of passengers.

At 10 o'clock that morning the *Otranto* and the *Orcades* steamed under the Sydney Harbour Bridge to moorings in the outer harbour, while tugs, ferries, little coasters and even railway engines ashore sounded cock-crows on their sirens. Next morning the four transports moved out of the harbour past the battleship *Ramillies* which was to be part of their escort, while the men crowded rails and rigging gazing with sentiment at the disappearing city. At 3 p.m., out of sight of land, they joined six other transports containing the 4th New Zealand Brigade. With *Ramillies* leading, the cruiser *Canberra* on one flank and *Australia* on the other the convoy steamed south in this order:

Otranto	*Orion*	*Orcades*
Strathaird	*Empress of Canada*	*Rangitata*
Sobieski	*Strathnaver*	*Dunera*
Orford		

It was an unforgettable sight (wrote the 16th Brigade's diarist—Corporal Roland Hoffman[4]) to see these ten ships, seven of them luxury liners, flanked by warships of the British and Australian Navies. They kept in perfect formation—it seemed as if their engines might be throbbing in unison. Here were approximately 13,000 troops on their way. Here was the spearhead of Australia's and New Zealand's challenge to Nazism, or any other "ism", that might menace the Empire and democracy at large. It must have given every man who watched this advance a great surge of satisfaction to be of it, a sense of privilege to be one of the chosen of the Second A.I.F.

Outside Port Phillip Bay on 12th January the *Empress of Japan* carrying part of divisional headquarters, some base troops and others, joined the convoy. At Freemantle all were given leave and crowded Perth for a last uproarious night in Australia. The convoy sailed from Freemantle soon after midday on the 20th. On some transports the men themselves were still uncertain where they were going, but, the day before the ships reached Freemantle, the German radio had announced that they were on the way to Suez.

[4] Cpl R. L. Hoffman, NX3832; HQ 16 Bde. Journalist; of Sydney, NSW; b. Perth, WA, 26 Jan 1907. Died in England, after release from P of W camp, Germany, 3 Aug 1945. Hoffman, a talented journalist and ardent soldier in whom Allen had great trust and to whom he gave much latitude, wrote the diary of this brigade until his capture in Crete in 1941. In 1940 he was appointed also to found and edit *AIF News*. With a clarity rare among diarists, Hoffman saw the men of whom he was one playing a part in a great drama, and he wrote for and sometimes addressed himself directly to "the historian" who would later read his words, and whose task he was consciously trying to make easier.

CHAPTER 4

TO THE MIDDLE EAST

THE tradition that Britain should maintain a naval supremacy in the Mediterranean so as to augment her power in Europe and protect her trade routes to Asia and beyond was established at the Battle of the Nile, though its origins lay farther back. The construction of the Suez Canal provided an additional reason for preserving that supremacy. In pursuit of it she occupied Egypt, Palestine, Cyprus and Malta, piped oil from Iraq to Haifa, cultivated a strong influence in the Arab world, and opposed whatever nation, whether Turkey, France, Russia or Italy, threatened to become master of the eastern Mediterranean and the Levant. In 1939 as in 1914 it was evident that Britain should endeavour to maintain the shorter and more economical sea route to the East, and even if German and Italian aircraft compelled her partly to abandon this route (and her leaders were convinced that she would have to divert much shipping via the Cape if Italy entered the war), she yet must try to prevent the European enemies from by-passing her naval power and marching into Asia and Africa.

The British leaders recognised that if Britain's military resources were preoccupied in a conflict with Germany, Italy might seize the opportunity to extend her influence in Africa and the eastern Mediterranean. So long as France was at Britain's side, with a fleet equal to Italy's and with armies in North Africa and Syria, the security of the Mediterranean demanded no great subtraction of power from the principal tasks—the blockade of the German Navy, the protection of the Atlantic routes, and the reinforcement of the French Army. By increasing the contingent of Indian troops in Egypt and by using Egypt and Palestine as training camps for Australian and New Zealand formations on their way to the French front, Britain could insure against Italian entry into the war without robbing the main theatre.

In order to give the military command in the Middle East a structure that would the better enable it to cope with large-scale operations, the British Government, in August 1939, had appointed General Sir Archibald Wavell[1] to control all its military forces in Egypt, Palestine and Transjordan, the Sudan and Cyprus. Hitherto there had been independent commanders of the British garrison in Palestine (Lieut-General Barker[2]), in Egypt (Lieut-General Maitland Wilson[3]), and in the Sudan (Major-

[1] Field Marshal Rt Hon Earl Wavell, GCB, GCSI, GCIE, CMG, MC. GOC-in-C Middle East 1939-41, India 1941-43; Supreme Cdr SW Pacific Jan-Mar 1942; Viceroy of India 1943-47. B. 5 May 1883. Died 24 May 1950.

[2] Lt-Gen M. G. H. Barker, CB, DSO. GOC Brit Forces in Pal and Transjordan 1939-40; GOC I Corps, France, 1940. B. 15 Oct 1884.

[3] Field Marshal Lord Wilson, GCB, GBE, DSO. (1914-18: GSO 1 NZ Div 1917-18.) GOC-in-C Egypt 1939, Cyrenaica, 1941; GOC-in-C Brit Tps in Greece 1941; GOC Ninth Army 1941; C-in-C Persia-Iraq Comd 1942-43; C-in-C Middle East 1943; Supreme Allied Comdr Medit Theatre 1944. B. 5 Sep 1881.

General Platt[4]). These became subordinate to Wavell, whose responsibilities ran parallel to those of the Naval Commander-in-chief in the Mediterranean (Vice-Admiral Sir Andrew Cunningham[5]) and the Air Commander-in-chief (Air Marshal Sir William Mitchell[6]). A British Dominion force, for example, arriving in the Middle East, would be commanded not directly by Wavell but by the commander of the area to which it was allotted.

The advance party of the Australian force had reached Egypt a few days before the convoy carrying the 16th Brigade sailed from Sydney. Brigadier Morris and Colonel Vasey travelled to Cairo and conferred with General Wavell and the British Ambassador, Sir Miles Lampson,[7] and thence went on to Jerusalem where General Barker outlined his plan for disposing the Australian force in camps in southern Palestine, with the Australian overseas base and the headquarters of the 6th Division side by side in Gaza. Morris decided, however, that the base could not be adequately housed at Gaza, and at his request office space was found in Jerusalem.

The voyage of the main Australian-New Zealand convoy was spent in hard training, with a break at Colombo where the men were given a day ashore. For all but a few it was their first experience of Asia and of a city crowded with dark-skinned people. The arrival of the Australians and New Zealanders in an Eastern country on this and later occasions caused some anxiety to both the local authorities and their own officers. The European soldier, coming from countries where class distinctions are more rigid, and the American, brought up in the presence of a Negro population, are conditioned to accept the castes and poverty of the East more easily than does the Australian, who habitually treats the Asiatic in a friendly and jocular style. To the end of the war most Australian soldiers had not acquired that remote and autocratic manner towards Asians then considered essential to the maintenance of European prestige in the East—a manner imitated by Europeans from that adopted by Asian people of rank and wealth towards their inferiors. However, in spite of misgivings, and apart from the fact that many of the Australians handed their haversack lunches to importunate native beggars, their deportment on this occasion appears to have evoked little criticism from the local officials. None were absent without leave after Colombo.

On 12th February the ships arrived at Ismailia in the Suez Canal, where the Secretary for the Dominions (Mr Eden[8]), who had come from

[4] Gen Sir William Platt, GBE, KCB, DSO. GOC Sudan 1938-41; GOC-in-C East Africa Comd 1941-45. B. 14 Jun 1885.

[5] Admiral of Fleet Viscount Cunningham, KT, GCB, DSO, RN. C-in-C Med Fleet 1939-42, Allied Naval Forces, Med, 1943; First Sea Lord and Chief of Naval Staff 1943-46. B. 1883.

[6] Air Chief Marshal Sir William Mitchell, KCB, CBE, DSO, MC, AFC. AOC-in-C RAF in ME 1939-40; IG of RAF 1940-41. Of London; b. Sydney, 8 Mar 1888. Died 16 Aug 1944. (He was replaced by Air Marshal Longmore in May 1940.)

[7] Rt Hon Lord Killearn, GCMG, CB, MVO. British Ambassador in Egypt and High Commissioner for the Sudan 1936-46. B. 26 Aug 1880.

[8] Rt Hon Sir Anthony Eden, KG, MC. Secretary for Dominion Affairs 1939-40, for War 1940, for Foreign Affairs 1935-38, 1940-45; Prime Minister 1955-57. B. 12 Jun 1897.

England to welcome the first Dominion troops to arrive in the Middle East, Sir Miles Lampson and General Wavell boarded the leading transport—the *Otranto*—in which were Brigadier Allen and his staff. On the night of the 12th-13th the Australian brigade disembarked at Kantara and entrained for Gaza and El Majdal, whence buses took them to the tented camp awaiting them at Julis. There they were welcomed by groups from two British[9] regular battalions of the Palestine garrison—the 2/Black Watch and 1/Hampshire Regiment, who had pitched tents for the newcomers.

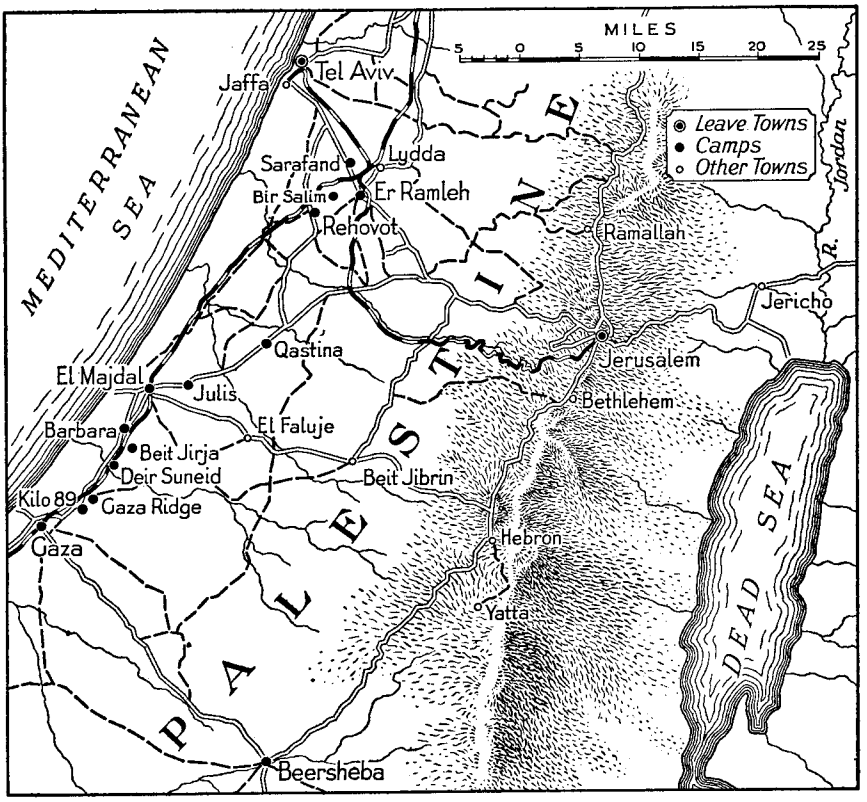
Brigadier Allen established a nucleus divisional headquarters at Qastina, five miles from Julis where Colonel Wootten temporarily commanded the 16th Brigade group, 3,500 strong. The camp at Julis was on green farmland, with the blue Mediterranean to the west and a pleasant grassed valley to the east. As soon as the Australians arrived they began to improve the camp. Sanitation, which was still defective, was made adequate; roads and paths were cut and gravelled; tents were furnished with tables and cupboards made from packing cases, and bordered with white stones and sometimes beds of flowers; trees were planted; familiar names were given to roads and living quarters—"Wagga", "King's Cross", "Ingleburn" and the like. Later the camps were subdivided into sections or "lines" each of which was named after a general of the 1st A.I.F.; thus the five sections at Julis were named Monash, Goddard, Gellibrand, Hobbs and Leane. Indeed Julis saw the beginning of the new Australian soldier's habit of giving a neat and homely air to camps in remote and unpromising places.

Within a few weeks batches of officers and men from every unit were doing courses at British army schools—the weapon training school at Bir Salim, the Bren carrier course at Sarafand, the recruit training depot, the cipher course in Jerusalem and others.[1] Meanwhile, on 1st March, the

[9] The word British is used in this series in two senses: in one to denote the peoples of the British Commonwealth and the British colonies as a whole; in the other to denote the people of the British Isles as distinct from those of the self-governing Dominions. Thus, when the 16th "British" Brigade is mentioned it should be understood that it was the 16th Brigade of the army of the United Kingdom; but when the expedition to Greece is described for the sake of brevity as "British" the word is being used in its wider sense. In the war with which these volumes deal, as in 1914-1918, the lack of simple words with which to distinguish United Kingdomers from Dominioners was more than a mere inconvenience, because irritation and sometimes serious harm could be caused by ineptly-written communiqués and reports in which the word "British" was used in senses not universally understood. For example, in 1941, when much of the fighting on land was being done by Dominion, Indian and native troops, those United Kingdom officers who were compiling communiqués in Cairo, and some Fleet Street correspondents received instructions to emphasise that United Kingdom troops were also taking part; and the names of United Kingdom regiments which were in action were listed from time to time. This was a natural and desirable reaction; but, at the same time, the custom was established of referring in the communiqués to "British Imperial" troops and the "British Imperial" army (the "British Imperial Army of the Nile", for example). By this term the communiqué writer probably intended to denote British troops from anywhere in the British Empire, but to most Dominion troops and their people at home the term had a very different meaning—troops of the army of the United Kingdom, India and the colonial Empire—and was sometimes used in Australian newspapers in that sense. As early as November 1939 the Commonwealth War Historian, Dr C. E. W. Bean, had written to Mr Street about the need for discovering another word than "British" for covering English and Dominion and other troops referred to in communiqués. He pointed out that great misunderstanding was caused in the last war because "British" to Australians meant "not Australian" whereas the writers of communiqués included Australians when using the term. However, no solution to the problem was sought, except that the still-more-misleading term "British Imperial" or "Imperial" was more often than not substituted for "British" in the sense of "belonging to the British Empire".
[For parallel experience in the previous war, see C. E. W. Bean *Official History of Australia in the War of 1914-18*, Vol VI (1942).]

[1] Four officers were chosen to attend the first course, from March to June, at the newly-established staff college at Haifa. They were Maj R. Bierwirth of the overseas base, and Captains A. G. Oldham (6 Div staff), and D. M. Cleland and W. R. G. Hiscock (both of the artillery).

units began a three months' course of training which was to culminate in three weeks during which battalions would exercise as battalions. Later new weapons were issued on a scale which made training possible—seventeen Brens, six anti-tank rifles and four 2-inch mortars to each battalion—and these were learnt under the instructions of the officers and N.C.O's who had gone to Palestine in December with the advance party.



All units are hard at work (wrote one diarist on 9th March). At night offices are a blaze of light . . . . Everyone realises that this is a dress-rehearsal before we play our role in the grim drama now being staged in Europe. Hence all are anxious to learn how to play their part and be ready for their cue at any moment.

The twenty-three British infantry battalions in the Middle East belonged to the regular army and, in the eyes of the Australians, were masters of a trade they themselves were busily trying to learn. The newcomers were happy to find that a battalion of the Black Watch had been given the task of fostering them when they arrived in Palestine, and were flattered when these British regulars praised their drill. Allen and his battalion commanders took pains to establish close associations with this regiment and with the 16th British Brigade. He arranged for a platoon of Australians

to be attached to the Black Watch for training, and later organised exercises in which both British regulars and Australians took part, so that to the high spirit of his force and the exacting tradition it had inherited from the First A.I.F. would be added the technical skill and smartness of British regulars. In Palestine the Australians soon received frequent reminders of the traditions they inherited from the First A.I.F.

Palestine had never known Australians as anything but soldiers (wrote one observer later). The awe in which the local Arab population, with memories of the Light Horse, held Australians had an excellent effect on the troops' bearing and morale. Vernacular newspapers, both Jewish and Arab, hailed the A.I.F's arrival in extravagant terms. One leading Jewish journal for example, under the heading, "Pride of the British Army", wrote: "If you ask a British general who are the best soldiers in the British Empire he will answer without hesitation: 'The Anzacs' . . . ."[2]

To travel is one of the soldier's chief compensations for a life that has more than its share of danger, discomfort, separation of lovers, and subjection to authority. To Australians the opportunity of seeing the world has a special appeal because they live in comparative isolation yet are possessed by exceptional curiosity about the world's affairs, those of their own country seeming insufficiently varied and picturesque to satisfy their restless minds. To successive contingents of them, Palestine, and in particular Jerusalem with its cosmopolitan people and its sacred antiquities, and even Tel Aviv, were objects of intense interest. From the outset the commanders helped particularly by Major Goward[3] of the Comforts Fund organisation, and with the cooperation of the well-equipped Y.M.C.A. in Jerusalem, had taken pains to make tours so cheap that all could afford them.[4] The intention was partly to keep the men out of trouble—always a particular anxiety of leaders of lively, relatively well-paid Dominion troops. The senior leaders knew from the experience of twenty years before that many of the British, Egyptians and Palestinians were convinced that Anzac troops were habitually ill-disciplined, and they were anxious to prove these critics wrong. Consequently steps were quickly taken also to provide sporting gear, to arrange bathing beaches where life-saving teams on the Australian model were established, to build cinemas, and equip clubs.

The discipline of Dominion troops did, in fact, raise special problems. From the outset very heavy fines were imposed on men who had been absent without leave. And in April Brigadier Allen had felt it necessary to issue an instruction on discipline that included examples of "discreditable behaviour" such as excessive numbers riding in gharries, eating and drinking in streets, scattering small coins, directing traffic, riding donkeys in the streets, collars undone, hands in pockets, obscene language. The

[2] Guy Harriott of the *Sydney Morning Herald.*

[3] Col R. S. Goward, CBE. Public accountant; of Ashfield, NSW; b. Ashfield, 16 Feb 1891. (He had been an officer of the Australian Comforts Fund in Palestine and Syria in 1918.)

[4] The ACF took over the Hotel Fast in Jerusalem on 22 Feb 1940. Two days later the first leave parties began to arrive. For a cost of £2 16s sterling for officers, £1 15s for sergeants and £1 10s 6d for other ranks, the men could enjoy four days' leave in comfort in Jerusalem, and at no extra cost participate in conducted tours to Bethlehem, the Garden of Gethsemane, Jericho and other places of biblical interest. (For a fuller account of the activities of the ACF during this period, see *Proud Story, The Official History of the Australian Comforts Fund,* Ch XI, by C. O. Badham Jackson.)

opening in May of a new brick theatre with seats for 1,000 brought forward again the question, persistent in a Dominion force, of the extent to which class distinctions, natural in a European army, should be applied to Dominion troops. There was a rowdy demonstration outside the theatre by men—"an irresponsible element" said the diarist of the 16th Brigade—who objected to the seats being divided into three grades, 80 mils (2s) for officers, 60 for N.C.O's and 30 for others. "The demonstrators," added the diarist, "claimed this to be a class distinction grading, and that any person . . . who could afford the best seats should be allowed to occupy them. They also disapproved . . . marching the men to their seats. The demonstration began with catcalls and boos and later . . . some men began hurling oranges and stones through the windows. . . . The disturbance was eventually quelled by officers."

Another step towards providing his men with comforts in a strange land was taken by Allen when, early in March, he called the three war correspondents together and suggested the establishment of a newspaper. It was to differ from most of the A.I.F. magazines of 1914-18 in being a complete newspaper—one which would be a serious journal and not merely a magazine of local gossip and satire. He appointed to edit the newspaper Sergeant Roland Hoffman, the Sydney newspaperman who had been writing his brigade's war diary. Goward agreed that the cost of producing the newspaper should be paid from the Australian Comforts Fund and, on 15th March, the first issue of a paper eventually named *A.I.F. News* appeared, with four cyclostyled pages of Australian and local news. Through the war correspondents, newspapers in Australia agreed to contribute a brief news service and the correspondents themselves wrote most of the local news.[5]

Of all amenities enjoyed by an army far from home mail is the most important, and the irregularity of the air mail and the infrequency of the sea mail was a genuine hardship. The rate was 60 mils (1s 6d) for a letter, 30 mils for a card—a heavy charge for married men receiving only 1s a day and allotting the remainder to their wives.[6]

Soon after its arrival the Australian force possessed its own canteens at which the men could buy beer, food and other luxuries and necessities. These had been established by the energy of Mr G. L. Gee,[7] a Sydney

[5] So far as can be discovered the *AIF News* was the first army newspaper of the 1939-45 war, not only in the Middle East but in any theatre. After some cyclostyled weekly issues had appeared the printing was undertaken by a Jerusalem firm which, under skilled guidance, produced a neat and attractive newspaper. Pte Alec King (of Ballarat) succeeded Hoffman, who asked to be allowed to rejoin his unit, and in March 1941 Sgt (later Major) C. H. Cheong, a Melbourne newspaperman, who had been serving on 21 Bde HQ became editor. The staff (which included Sgt Lawson Glassop who later wrote a novel entitled *We Were The Rats* and a group of other widely-experienced journalists) was gradually enlarged, and the office transferred to Cairo. Under Cheong the *AIF News* developed into a first-class newspaper with a circulation of 40,000. It blossomed with pictorial supplements, sometimes in colour, war maps, topical pictures and drawings. In it appeared verse by most of the young poets of the force including Paul Buddee, Shawn O'Leary, Tip Kelaher and David McNicoll. (See "The AIF News" by WO Harry Grover, *Salt*, 10 May 1943; and "The AIF News" by John Hetherington, *Newspaper News*, May 1943.)

[6] There was no sea mail from Australia for two months after Italy's entry and sometimes no air mail for several weeks. In November, however, the letter rate was reduced to 9d and a regular twice-weekly service established.

[7] Col G. L. Gee (1st AIF: Pay Corps.) Deputy Dir Aust Canteen Services, ME. Merchant; of Sydney; b. Blenheim, NZ, 5 Jun 1888. Died 22 Feb 1947.

merchant who had served in the Pay Corps in the First A.I.F. He had been told by the Quartermaster-General, Major-General Smart,[8] in December, that, if he wished, he would be considered for appointment as deputy director of canteens, and was asked to draft proposals for an Australian canteens service overseas. Smart at first considered that the Australian deputy director should be a liaison officer with N.A.A.F.I.,[9] the British canteens organisation, which should also serve Australian troops. Gee, however, argued that it would be necessary to obtain for Australian troops the kind of goods that they were used to, that greater profits would be made if the canteens were under Australian control than from a sharing agreement with N.A.A.F.I., and those profits would be immediately available to provide amenities. After having elaborated his proposals Gee was appointed to control A.I.F. canteens with the rank of major. He was informed that £2,000 would be allocated to finance the service, but decided that this would be far too little and, with the support of Brigadier Allen, persuaded the committee of the Sydney Lord Mayor's Patriotic Fund to lend an additional £3,000. Gee thereupon bought goods valued at £8,217 13s 4d, partly on credit. He had completed these transactions in time to ship the goods in the *Otranto* before it sailed with the first convoy. Gee then flew to Palestine where he was informed by Brigadier Morris that, after all, the canteens in Australian camps were to be conducted by N.A.A.F.I. and that Gee would act as liaison officer. Again, however, Gee was able to persuade his senior to alter the decision. The outcome was that the Australian service took over from N.A.A.F.I. the canteens in the Australian area, including their goods and equipment.

Thus Allen and Vasey, with the help of exceptionally keen and able officers who, in the cases of Goward and Gee, had experience of similar work in the previous war,[1] laid firm foundations for a generous system of amenities destined to grow to considerable size.

Allen not only administered command of the nucleus headquarters of the A.I.F., the 6th Division and the Overseas Base, but was appointed by General Barker to be commandant of the Gaza-Beersheeba area, and thus became responsible for law and order, and partly for general civil administration in approximately one-fifth of Palestine. To this extent the nucleus Australian force was playing a part in the garrisoning of the Middle East.

For the present the British leaders in London were confident that Germany would not move into the Balkans in the spring, and that neither Italy nor Russia (then regarded as a potential enemy) would soon enter the war. The Chiefs of Staff informed the Australian High Commissioner

[8] Lt-Gen E. K. Smart, DSO, MC, VX133279. (1st AIF: Lt 55 Siege Bty 1915-16; CO 110 How Bty 1918.) QMG AHQ 1939-40; GOC Southern Comd 1940-42; Aust Mil Rep Washington 1942, London 1942-45. Regular soldier; b. Kew, Vic, 23 May 1891.

[9] Navy, Army, and Air Force Institutes. This organisation, established after the war of 1914-18, had developed into a big business, with branches wherever there were substantial British garrisons, and producing a surplus of more than £1,000,000 a year.

[1] The work of the Red Cross, whose senior Commissioner, Col H. E. Cohen (of Caulfield, Vic) had been a unit commander in 1915-18, is described in the medical volumes of this history.

(Mr Bruce) that it was not intended to employ the Australians in policing Palestine, though their presence there would have a salutary effect. If, when the Australian forces in the Middle East were fit to take the field, the situation there was quiet, they wished them to complete their equipping in France or England and eventually join General Gort's[2] British Expeditionary Force in France, which was being increased as fast as Britain's slow-growing store of equipment would allow.

When war broke out the British regular army in the United Kingdom had included five infantry and one armoured division; and a second armoured division was planned; the Territorial Army was being doubled, the object being to attain a strength of 450,000, with eighteen infantry, six motorised, two armoured and seven anti-aircraft divisions (the latter for the anti-aircraft defence of the United Kingdom). However, there was yet only enough equipment to enable fewer than one-third of these to take the field. By April thirteen British divisions were in France, and three of these were only partly-armed. One Canadian division was arriving in England. In the minds of the British leaders was a picture of a new Western front, with the French Army on the right and the British, including Canadian, Australian and New Zealand divisions, on the left. The main problem was to find enough weapons to arm this force, particularly such weapons as guns and tanks.[3]

But although the Middle East seemed not to be immediately threatened General Wavell and his fellow commanders-in-chief faced delicate political and military problems there. Wavell had high and varied qualifications for carrying out perhaps the most complex task of the three. Much of his service during the thirty-eight years since he had joined the army as an infantry subaltern in the South African War had been in the Middle East or the countries bordering it—India before 1914, Russia in 1916 and 1917, a senior staff post in Palestine in the last year of Allenby's campaign, the command in Palestine in 1937-38. He had long been considered one of the leaders of British military thought, had written a short history of the Palestine campaigns of 1916-18, a biography of Allenby, and a series of papers on generalship and soldiering that were both original in substance and engaging in style. These, like his speeches and writings during the war, were patently the fruit not only of varied experience and shrewd observation but of reading in a field far wider than most soldiers permit themselves. In these writings he emphasised the importance of knowledge of "topography, movement and supply". "These," he wrote, "are the real foundations of military knowledge, not strategy and tactics as most people think. It is the lack of this knowledge of the principles and

[2] Field Marshal Viscount Gort, VC, GCB, CBE, DSO, MVO, MC. CIGS War Office 1937-39; GOC-in-C BEF 1939-40; Govr and C-in-C Gibraltar 1941-42; C-in-C Malta 1942-44. B. 10 Jul 1886. Died 31 Mar 1946.

[3] The first of the new 25-pounders had not yet come from the factories, though some old 18-pounders had been converted into the new gun. The one armoured division in England was semi-equipped; it was hoped that by the end of 1940 there would be four such divisions. In March infantry battalions in England had only 18 Bren guns each—one to a platoon instead of one to a section; in April the 1st Canadian Division, with from six to eight (instead of twenty-four) field guns to a regiment, was reported to the Australian Government to be the best-equipped division in the Aldershot Command.

practice of military movement and administration—the "logistics" of war, some people call it—which puts what we call amateur strategists wrong, not the principles of strategy themselves, which can be apprehended in a very short time by any reasonable intelligence."

The general of his ideal would spend as little time as possible in his office, as much as possible with the troops (a particularly useful principle for the commander of an army drawn from many peoples and scattered among several fronts). Similarly, he advised the soldier to read not outlines of strategy but biographies, memoirs and historical novels, wherein he would get "the flesh and blood of it, not the skeleton". Above all, the commander must possess robustness of mind to enable him to stand the strain of the appalling responsibilities he must shoulder in battle; character was of greater importance than brains or experience; and he must be willing to take risks. At the end of his lectures on generalship he spoke for a majority of the keen and able British commanders of his generation who had been trained in the mud and blood of 1914-18 when he said: "Let us add one more altar, 'To the Unknown Leader', that is, to the good company, platoon, or section leader who carries forward his men or holds his post and often falls unknown." If Wavell was not endowed by nature with all these gifts there can be no doubt that he strove to cultivate them, yet it was his nature to conceal his virtues beneath a genuinely reserved and unassuming exterior and an uncompromising honesty which forbade him to try to cover up a mistake but rather compelled him to confess it—a rare quality in a soldier.

But, since both from Cairo and in later posts, Wavell was destined to command armies which were made up very largely of Dominion troops, it was unfortunate that he had not had any close association with a Dominion before—unlike, for example, General Dill[4] who had served on the staff of an Australian division in 1917, General Brooke,[5] who had served on a Canadian staff, or General Montgomery,[6] who had spent his childhood in Australia. It was rare for a British officer clearly to understand the independent status of the young nations, common for them to refer to the Dominions as colonies and to think of them as such, and difficult for them to accept the fact that Dominion governments had responsibilities towards their own troops no less telling than those borne by the Ministers in Whitehall towards theirs. It was difficult also for the general run of British commanders to appreciate that the Dominions had military traditions derived from their own national characteristics and so firmly established that they were to be judged on their own merits and not entirely by the standards of the British Army. To men of the Dominions who were closely in contact with the British Army during the

[4] Field Marshal Sir John Dill, GCB, CMG, DSO. GOC I Army Corps 1939-40; CIGS War Office 1940-41; Head of Brit Representation on Combined Chs of Staff 1942-44. B. 25 Dec 1881. Died 4 Nov 1944.

[5] Field Marshal Viscount Alanbrooke, KG, GCB, OM, DSO. GOC II Corps BEF 1939-40; C-in-C Home Forces 1940-41; CIGS War Office 1941-46. B. 23 Jul 1883.

[6] Field Marshal Viscount Montgomery, KG, GCB, DSO. GOC 3 Div 1939-40, V Corps 1940, XII Corps 1941, Eighth Army 1942-43, 21 Army Gp 1944-45; CIGS War Office 1946-48. B. 17 Nov 1887.

war it was a rare and gratifying experience to encounter a British soldier whose view of the Australian or the New Zealander was not expressed more or less in the words: "Fine fighter, but overruns the objective; undisciplined when he's out of the line." To a majority of the British commanders whom the Australians encountered, the spontaneous, equalitarian Dominion citizen was a problem child. For example, Wavell, in his address to the 16th Brigade at Gaza in February—his first address to Australians—referred in his opening words to the Australian reputation for lack of discipline and returned to the subject later in his speech, saying that the Egyptians had "lively apprehensions of what Australians might do in Cairo and elsewhere in Egypt." "I look to you," he added, "to show them that their notions of Australians as rough, wild undisciplined people given to strong drink are incorrect. The Egyptians, generally speaking, are a kindly and peaceable people, very easy to get on with. They have good manners themselves and very much appreciate good manners." These were not the happiest words with which to welcome a force of British volunteer citizen soldiers. Later, when an Australian force arrived from England, Wavell's welcoming speech contained a complaint about the discipline of the 6th Division in Libya—a subject on which he had been wrongly informed.[7]

The problem which Wavell and his fellow commanders faced—the defence of British interests in the Middle East—had been carefully considered by the Committee of Imperial Defence. Before the Russo-German agreement of August 1939 British planning was aimed at countering attack by Italy, and staff talks on this subject had been held with French commanders. The British staffs hoped that conflict with Italy would be avoided, and consequently that commitments would not occur in the Balkans where such a conflict might easily arise, but plans were prepared not only to meet an Italian attack but to take the offensive against her. After the Russo-German agreement the military planners took into account the possibility of attack also by Russia. This possibility gave added importance to Iraq and Turkey. In October 1939 Britain and France (who were already under an obligation to support Greece against oppression) signed a military convention with Turkey, though in the staff talks that followed, the British and French representatives were able to offer only limited help.

General Wavell's headquarters and a great part of his army were in Egypt, an independent kingdom of whose support in war Britain could not be certain. Her relations with that country were defined in a treaty, of 1936, which provided that for the following seven years British troops might remain in the neighbourhood of Alexandria with freedom of move-

[7] Pre-conceived convictions about the colonial were not confined to senior officers, and those young Australian officers who came closely into contact with British units were at first puzzled and later irritated by the coolness with which officers of some of the British regiments in Palestine received them. In an Australian mess it was considered obligatory to make a stranger feel at home, yet there appeared to them to be a tendency on the part of some British officers to seek in the newcomers some proof of their ready-made conviction that colonial officers were uncouth and their troops ill-disciplined. Longer acquaintance with British officers of this type showed that they were equally cool to their own fellow officers who offended against their accepted ideas of deportment or dress.

ment for training, in war or in an "apprehended international emergency". Thus the British army in Egypt was occupying a foreign land whose Government, though it broke off diplomatic relations with Germany, seemed likely to avoid committing itself more deeply to the Allied cause. When the war began that army included the 7th Armoured Division, one of only two which Britain possessed, and it consisted of two brigades each of only two instead of three regiments;[8] one brigade group of the 4th Indian Division, four artillery regiments and eight battalions of infantry. In Palestine were ten battalions of infantry, two cavalry regiments but no artillery. Thus, though there were infantry enough to form two divisions, there was little artillery (only sixty-four field, forty-eight anti-tank and eight anti-aircraft guns) and not one complete division, either armoured or infantry. Yet it was estimated that in Tripolitania and Cyrenaica there were, in December 1939, fourteen Italian divisions (which had nevertheless to take into account a French army of about the same strength on their western flank), and in Abyssinia some 140,000 men, fairly well provided with artillery and tanks. To watch the frontiers of Italian East Africa Wavell had, in the Sudan, little more than a brigade; and, in Somaliland, some 500 men of a native camel corps (there were about 5,000 French native troops in Jibuti). In Kenya were some battalions of African troops with British officers.

In Palestine, from 1936 until the outbreak of war, the Arabs had been in rebellion against the continuance of Jewish immigration and the transfer of land to the Jews. However, just before war broke out Dr Weizmann, the leader of the moderate Zionists, told Mr Chamberlain that the Jewish community would stand with Britain and the democracies; and, a few days later, leading Arabs assured the British High Commissioner, Sir Harold MacMichael,[9] of their loyalty. Both Jews and Arabs volunteered for national service. Nevertheless, although influential leaders both Arab and Jewish called a truce there was still a bitter dispute unsettled, and restless men at large. Immigration of refugee Jews beyond the agreed quota continued[1] and, a fortnight after the arrival of the Australians and New Zealanders, the Palestine Government published regulations putting into effect a policy announced nearly a year before, which divided the country into three zones, in one of which purchase of land by Jews was prohibited, in another restricted and in the third free. The enforcement of these regulations led to demonstrations and strikes by Jews in Jerusalem, Haifa and Tel Aviv.

In February 1940 Wavell's responsibility was extended to include British land forces in East Africa and, if need be, the Balkans, and he was

[8] In 1939 a British armoured division consisted of one brigade of light and one of cruiser tanks, with a support group which included one motorised infantry battalion and one artillery regiment. In 1940 the support group was increased by another infantry battalion and an artillery regiment armed with anti-aircraft and anti-tank guns.

[9] Sir Harold MacMichael, GCMG, DSO. High Commnr and C-in-C for Palestine and High Commnr for Transjordan 1938-44. B. 15 Oct 1882.

[1] "By encouraging illegal immigration into Palestine, Nazi Germany contributed materially to Britain's difficulties in the Middle East and in Eastern Europe. What was more important to Hitler, it made the Nazi hatred of the Jews follow the Jews to the Middle East, to be the main cementing factor in the Nazi-Arab alliance." Ben Horin, *The Middle East: Crossroads of History* (1943), p. 180.

instructed that, in an emergency, the command of the troops in Iraq and Aden (in each of which an air officer was in command) would be included. Wavell's task demanded not only the qualities needed in a general able to control operations over a wide area, but much tact and political adroitness. In addition, there was no theatre in which greater care was needed to ensure cooperation between the three Services. Coordination of plans was maintained by a Joint Planning Staff of which the senior staff officer of each commander-in-chief was a member; and a Middle East Intelligence Centre was established under Colonel Cawthorn[2] with a staff drawn from the three Services and civilians.

Before the 16th Australian and 4th New Zealand Brigades arrived in February Wavell's force had been increased only by one more Indian infantry brigade for the 4th Indian Division and a battalion of British infantry from China. In March the 1st Cavalry Division (horsed), a British Yeomanry formation, incomplete in training and equipment, arrived in Palestine. Thus six divisions were then represented—the 7th Armoured, 6th British, 1st Cavalry, 6th Australian, New Zealand and 4th Indian—but none was at full strength and fully equipped, and four were only nucleus formations.

What danger had there been in the early months of 1940 of Italy entering the war on Germany's side? Although the British staffs did not fully realise it, Italy was little better prepared for war in 1939 than in 1914. Her people and a group among the leaders disliked and mistrusted the Germans; she lacked raw materials; and her army was ill-equipped, poorly-led and in low spirits. Of her forty-five divisions only ten were fully-armed and ready for action. Before Germany attacked Poland, Mussolini, aware of his country's economic and military weakness, informed Hitler that he would not be ready for war until 1942. The Russian march into Eastern Poland further depressed the Italian leaders, particularly because they feared the spread of Russian influence in the Balkans where they, in common with the Germans, hoped to gain power and territory. Count Ciano, Mussolini's Foreign Minister, wrote on 25th September, probably quoting his leader: "They (the Russians) have two weapons that make them still more terrible: pan-Slavic nationalism, with which they can bring pressure on the Balkans, and Communism, which is spreading rapidly among the proletariat all over the world, beginning with Germany itself."[3]

However, on 18th March 1940 Mussolini met Hitler at the Brenner Pass and affirmed his intention of entering the war on Germany's side, but said that he would choose his own time. Britain's partial blockade of Italy infuriated Mussolini but not sufficiently to cause him to take the plunge. Then came the second climax of the war. The German success in overrunning Denmark and Norway excited the Italian leader. The

[2] Maj-Gen Sir Walter Cawthorn, CB, CIE, CBE. (1st AIF: Capt 22 Bn; and Ind Army after 1918.) Head of Middle East Int Centre 1939-41; Dir of Mil Int G.H.Q. India 1941-45. B. Prahran, Vic, 18 Jun 1896.

[3] *Ciano's Diary, 1939-1943* (1947).

Norwegian campaign was still in progress when, at 5 a.m. on 10th May, the German Ambassador in Rome visited him with the news that the German Army had invaded Holland and Belgium.

On 15th May the Dutch surrendered. On the 19th, Churchill, who had replaced Mr Chamberlain as Prime Minister on the 10th, encouraging the people with his thunderous oratory and buoyant faith, declared that Britain might look forward with confidence to the stabilisation of the front in France. But on the 21st the British and French Armies as well as the Belgian were in full retreat. M. Reynaud, the new French Prime Minister, spoke of "incredible mistakes which will be punished", and admitted that "our classic conception of the conduct of war has come up against a new conception." On the 25th twenty-five French generals were removed. On 28th May Belgium capitulated and the British Expeditionary Force was being embarked at Dunkirk.

On 30th May Mussolini, who had appointed himself supreme commander of all the Italian forces, informed Hitler that he proposed to declare war on 5th June unless Hitler considered that date inconvenient. Hitler expressed enthusiasm but asked for a postponement of a few days because, he said, he proposed a decisive attack on French airfields and feared that Italian action might alter the French dispositions. Italy entered the war at midnight on the 10th-11th; but it was not until the 21st that Mussolini ordered his army to attack the French, who were then discussing an armistice with their German conquerors.

In the four months between the departure of the first Australian convoy for Palestine and the opening of this calamitous episode in western Europe some cautious progress had been made with Australia's military preparations. On 1st January General Squires had revived the proposal, originally made by the British Chiefs of Staff in November, that a 7th Division be raised which, with the 6th, would form an Australian corps. Attack by Japan now seemed less likely, he said, and added:

> It is apparent that the safety of the Empire and of Australia depends on the defeat of Germany and also that the resources of the Allies must be used to the limit of practicability in resisting the German attacks that are almost certain to commence in the European spring. The Maginot Line may well be secure, but a successful attack through Holland and Belgium could turn the main Maginot defences, apart from giving the enemy possession of ports which may well mean the difference between success and failure in his attacks at sea.

When he was asked by the ministers what the strength of such a force would be, Squires replied that it would need either 48,650 or 41,978, according to whether the Australian or the smaller British establishments were adopted, and that probably from 36,000 to 46,000 reinforcements would be required each year. On 28th February the War Cabinet decided to form the new division and the necessary corps troops, first recommended four months earlier, but on the British establishment; thus the three surplus battalions of the 6th Division could be used in forming the



(Australian War Memorial photo)

A race meeting held at Barbara, Palestine, 7th September 1940, before the 6th Division completed its concentration in Egypt.



The arrival of 2/6th Battalion at Beit Jirja, Palestine, 18th May 1940.



(W. R. Dexter photos)

2/6th Battalion: Drawing rations on an exercise in Egypt, September-October 1940.

7th.[4] Also, in response to a request from the British Government for companies of experienced railway constructors and foresters, it was agreed also to form three railway construction companies, a railway survey company and two forestry companies, which, with a small headquarters for the railway group, would total 1,243 officers and men.

An interesting aspect of the appointments to the new division was that two brigadiers (including Brigadier Milford,[5] the artillery commander), one battalion commander, and the commanders of several of the corps units were officers of the Staff Corps, whose members had been grievously disappointed when none were allotted commands in the 6th Division. Robertson,[6] the commander of the 19th Brigade which was destined to join the 6th not the 7th Division, was considered an outstanding leader and a particularly able trainer. He had served in the light horse on Gallipoli and in Palestine, and between the wars had left his mark particularly as chief instructor at the Small Arms School, as Director of Military Art (senior member of the teaching staff) at the Royal Military College, and later in command of the garrison at Darwin. He was a confident commander, sure of himself and of any troops he had trained. He believed that physical hardness was one of the first necessities of military efficiency; he took special pains to insist on smartness of dress and deportment. Some successful commanders have been unassuming and inconspicuous, others have striven to present their men with a picturesque figure to look up to and talk about, perhaps to emulate. Robertson was of the latter type, just as definitely as Mackay, for example, was of the former. He was ambitious and was criticised for making no secret of it, but this ambition was with him more than a personal affair, and embraced the men he commanded.

Plans for the formation and training of the new force were still being elaborated when, on 3rd March, General Squires died after having given nearly two years of service in the Australian Army. He was replaced by calling back from retirement the distinguished soldier who (C. E. W.

[4] A total of 60 corps units was planned, ranging from units of battalion strength to small groups such as light aid detachments, a mobile bath unit, a salvage unit and a provost company. The corps artillery units were to include one medium artillery regiment armed with 6-inch howitzers, and one armed with 60-pounders, a survey regiment, an anti-aircraft regiment, a light anti-aircraft regiment and two field regiments—the 2/7th and 2/8th. There were to be two machine-gun regiments, including one already raised. It was decided to equip the 7th Division with rifles, Vickers guns and carriers in Australia, but that it should receive its remaining weapons and probably its transport vehicles from British sources when it was overseas.
It was planned that the infantry of the new division would consist of:

19 Inf Bde: Brig H. C. H. Robertson	2/15 (Qld) Bn: Lt-Col R. F. Marlan
2/4 (NSW) Bn: Lt-Col P. A. Parsons	2/17 (NSW) Bn: Lt-Col J. W. Crawford
2/8 (Vic) Bn: Lt-Col J. W. Mitchell	21 Inf Bde: Brig J. E. S. Stevens
2/12 (Tas and Qld) Bn: Lt-Col J. Field	2/14 (Vic) Bn: Lt-Col W. G. Cannon
20 Inf Bde: Brig J. J. Murray	2/16 (WA) Bn: Lt-Col A. R. B. Cox
2/13 (NSW) Bn: Lt-Col F. A. Burrows	2/27 (SA) Bn: Lt-Col M. J. Moten

The 19th Bde came into being on 23 May when Col Mitchell, who acted as its commander until the arrival of Brig Robertson in June, held the first conference of his improvised staff. Eventually the 2/11 Bn took the place of the 2/12, which remained in the 18th Bde.

[5] Maj-Gen E. J. Milford, CB, CBE, DSO, VX12014. (1st AIF: Maj 4 AFA Bde.) CRA 7 Div 1940; MGO AHQ 1941-42; GOC 5 Div 1942-44, 7 Div 1944-45. Regular soldier; b. Armadale, Vic, 10 Dec 1894.

[6] Lt-Gen Sir Horace Robertson, KBE, DSO, VX20321. (1st AIF: 10 LH Regt and GSO3 Yeo Mtd Div 1917-18.) Comd 19 Bde 1940-41, AIF Rfct Depot ME 1941; GOC 1 Armd Div 1942-43, Western Comd 1944-45, 5 Div and 6 Div 1945. Comd BCOF 1946-51. Regular soldier; of Melbourne; b. Warrnambool, Vic, 29 Oct 1894. Died 28 Apr 1960.

Bean had written) played "the outstanding part" in building the First A.I.F.—General Sir Brudenell White. No one more learned in the problems that faced the leaders of a Dominion expeditionary force could have been found. White, although then only 38, had been the senior general staff officer at Army Headquarters when war broke out in 1914 and, after that, successively chief of staff of the 1st Division, and to Birdwood at Anzac and in France. He had been Chief of the General Staff from 1920 until 1923, when, at the age of 46 years, having occupied the highest post the Australian Army could offer, he resigned to become chairman of the Commonwealth Public Service Board. It was one of White's first acts to recommend that Blamey, who had succeeded him as chief of the Australian Corps in 1918, should be given command of the new corps.

Blamey's promotion again brought forward the question of Lavarack's employment. Mr Street, after taking the advice of White, recommended to the War Cabinet that Lavarack be appointed to command the 6th and Major-General Mackay, who commanded the 2nd Division of the militia, the 7th, but the Cabinet, after consulting Blamey as well as White, reversed the order and appointed Mackay to the 6th and Lavarack to the 7th.[7]

The staff of the new corps, like that of the 6th Division from which a number of its officers were promoted, was of exceptional quality. Again there was a large field of thoroughly-trained officers to choose from; at that time the Australian regular officer corps could have staffed a far larger force (although only by gravely depleting the headquarters and schools in Australia). The new staff was led by Rowell, who had been Blamey's "G1" in the 6th Division and now became his "BGS" (Brigadier, General Staff). To the general staff were added a group of picked staff college graduates, including Lieut-Colonels Rourke[8] and Irving[9] and Major Elliott;[1] in the succeeding weeks two capable non-professional officers, Majors Rogers[2] and Wills,[3] were appointed to the Intelligence, a branch which, peculiarly, had little appeal for professional staff officers (though there was never a lack of highly-qualified regular officers for appointments in ordnance and other services). Rogers, an industrial scientist and business executive, had served in the ranks and as a young battalion, divisional and corps Intelligence officer in the previous war; Wills, a

[7] So that he could accept his appointment, Lavarack, a lieut-general in the Staff Corps, was appointed to the AIF with the rank of major-general.

[8] Brig H. G. Rourke, MC, VX14282. (1st AIF: Maj 7 Fd Arty Bde.) GSO1 8 Div 1940-41; BGS I Corps 1942; Military Asst to the Australian accredited representative in the UK War Cabinet 1943-45. Regular soldier; of Sydney; b. Ashfield, NSW, 26 Jun 1896.

[9] Brig R. G. H. Irving, OBE, NX1. GSO2 6 Div 1939-40; GSO2 (Int) I Corps 1940; DDMT GHQ MEF 1941-42; DMT LHQ 1943-45. Regular soldier; of Melbourne; b. Ballarat, Vic, 15 Jul 1898.

[1] Brig C. M. L. Elliott, OBE, VX12756. GSO (Ops) I Corps 1940-41; GSO1 7 Div 1942; BGS Second Army 1943-44; Chairman Base Planning Cttee 1944-46. Regular soldier; of Camberwell, Vic; b. Geraldton, WA, 12 Jan 1899.

[2] Brig J. D. Rogers, CBE, MC, VX40124. (1st AIF: Pte to Capt 6 Bn.) GSO2 (Int) I Corps 1940-41; Dir Mil Int LHQ 1942-45. Oil company executive; of Melbourne; b. Penguin, Tas, 29 Apr 1895.

[3] Brig Sir Kenneth Wills, KBE, MC, SX3199. (1914-18: Capt 2/15 Bn, The London Regt and The Northumberland Fus.) GSO3 (Air) I Corps 1940-41, GSO2 (Int) I Corps 1941-42; GSO1 (Int) First Army 1942-43; DDMI HQ NG Force 1943-44; Controller Allied Int Bureau GHQ SWPA 1944-45. Merchant; of Adelaide; b. Adelaide, 3 Mar 1896.

leading business man of Adelaide, had served in a British infantry regiment in the earlier war. General Wynter dropped a step in rank and became senior administrative officer (Deputy Adjutant and Quartermaster General), a post somewhat smaller than his exceptional experience and talents deserved but the highest the oversea force could offer in the field in which he was outstanding. Next to him was Colonel "Gaffer" Lloyd,[4] considered one of the ablest of the group of particularly promising officers who had been at Duntroon in 1918 and graduated into the Staff Corps in the years immediately following the war. As commander of the artillery Brigadier Clowes,[5] senior among the Duntroon graduates, and until recently chief instructor at the School of Artillery was chosen; most of their contemporaries considered that he or Rowell would be the first Duntroon graduate to fill the highest post in the Australian Army. To command the medium artillery Colonel Ramsay,[6] a schoolmaster who had been in the ranks in 1918 but had won rapid promotion in the militia, was promoted from the command of the 2/2nd Regiment; the senior engineer (Steele), signaller (Simpson[7]), and medical officer (Burston[8]) of the 6th Division were similarly promoted. The senior ordnance officer was Brigadier Beavis who, like Wynter, was qualified to hold considerably higher appointments in his branch than the best the corps offered. All these staff officers were considered fit for rapid promotion, and since the force would expand, as the first A.I.F. had done, they were likely to attain it.

The 7th Division was still being formed when, on 1st May, the British Government had warned the Australian Prime Minister of the possible entry of Italy into the war, and, as the Mediterranean would be a theatre of war, advised that the second and third convoys of the A.I.F. (chiefly the 17th and 18th Brigades) be held at Colombo and Fremantle respectively. The second convoy had sailed from Melbourne on 14th and 15th April, the third was to depart from Melbourne on 5th May. On the 8th advice was received from the British Chiefs of Staff that the two convoys should continue their voyage, and the War Cabinet agreed to this, though its members were critical of the paucity of the information they were receiving from London, feeling strongly that, particularly while such large forces were at sea, at least the Prime Minister should possess

[4] Maj-Gen C. E. M. Lloyd, CBE, VX4. DAAG 6 Div 1939-40; AQMG I Corps 1940; GSO1 9 Div 1941; Deputy Intendant General SWPA (ABDACOM) 1942; DSD LHQ 1942-43; AG LHQ 1943-45. Regular soldier; b. Fremantle, WA, 2 Feb 1899. Died 31 May 1956.

[5] Maj-Gen C. A. Clowes, CBE, DSO, MC, TX2050. (1st AIF: BM 2 Div Arty 1918.) CRA I Corps 1940-41 and BRA HQ AIF (ME) 1941; GOC 1 Div 1942; Comd Milne Force 1942; GOC 11 Div 1942-43; Comd Vic L of C Area 1943-45. Regular soldier; of Warwick, Qld; b. Warwick, 11 Mar 1892.

[6] Maj-Gen A. H. Ramsay, CB, CBE, DSO, VX27. (1st AIF: Gnr to Lt in 22 & 4 AFA Bdes.) CO 2/2 Fd Regt 1939-40; Comd Med Arty I Corps 1940; CRA 9 Div 1940-43; CRA II Corps 1943-44; GOC 5 Div 1944-45. School teacher and university lecturer; of Essendon, Vic; b. Windsor, Vic, 12 Mar 1895.

[7] Maj-Gen C. H. Simpson, CBE, MC, VX79. (1st AIF: Lt 3 Pnr Bn and 3 Div Sig Coy.) CSO I Corps 1940-42; SO-in-C LHQ 1942-45. Chemist; of Melbourne; b. Balaclava, Vic, 13 Apr 1894.

[8] Maj-Gen Sir Samuel Burston, KBE, CB, DSO, VX2. (1st AIF: 7 Fd Amb 1915; SMO AGB Depot 1917-18.) ADMS 6 Div 1939-40; DDMS I Corps 1940; DMS AIF ME 1940-42; DGMS AMF 1942-48. Physician; of Adelaide; b. Melbourne, 21 Mar 1888. Died 21 Aug 1960.

"documentation relating to Allied activities and the growth of their efforts, and critical reviews or intelligence reports as to parallel enemy action".

The German invasion of France had begun when, on 15th May, the Australian Government received a cable from the Dominions Office that shed a little light into the darkness. It said that plans were being made to divert the third convoy to Cape Town and suggested that it travel thence to England. Always anxious to prevent the splitting up of the force, even in those days of tension, the War Cabinet asked whether it would not be possible for the force concerned to complete its training in the north-west of India or in South Africa, whence it would be easier for it to rejoin the remainder of the division in Egypt. The Ministers decided that, in the meantime, General Blamey, who was due to leave for Palestine on 25th May, should remain in Australia (part of his staff, including his chief administrative officer, Wynter, was in the third convoy); and eventually that the third convoy should go to England.[9] Already the War Cabinet (on 22nd May) had approved the formation of a third division of the A.I.F., to be numbered the 8th, although, at that time, only 6,000 men had been enlisted for the 7th Division and corps troops, which together would require 30,400.[1]

On 4th June the Ministers in the War Cabinet, who still were awaiting the arrival from London of a detailed summing-up of the new situation, decided that General Blamey should go to Palestine. This decision was recommended by General White who contended that General Mackay was inexperienced in the "higher administration and political principles relating to the control of the A.I.F."; he expressed the opinion that the next strong German effort would be made against the French and that the A.I.F. should be sent to the front there by way of Marseilles, because "it was of great military and psychological importance to have Australian troops in France". A week later, however, the Ministers summoned the Chiefs of Staff to advise on the situation resulting from the entry of Italy into the war which had taken place the previous day. It was already apparent that France was on the verge of defeat. The First Naval Member, Admiral Colvin,[2] said that if France was overcome Britain would have to withdraw from the Mediterranean except for the use that could be made by entry through Port Said; Air Chief Marshal Burnett[3] considered that it would be impossible to use the Red Sea until the Italian air forces in East Africa had been rendered ineffective. Nevertheless General White advised that Allied naval strength was such that the local defence of Australia should be considered secondary to Empire cooperation, and he urged that the A.I.F. formations in Australia be sent overseas as soon as possible, arguing, incidentally, that the Australian was "a much more manageable soldier when separated from his family and political and other

[9] The experiences of this force are narrated in Appendix 1.

[1] The effect of the invasion of France on the Australian government and people is described in Paul Hasluck, *The Government and the People, 1939-41*.

[2] Admiral Sir Ragnar Colvin, KBE, CB. First Naval Member, Aust Naval Board 1937-41. B. 7 May 1882. Died 22 Feb 1954.

[3] Air Chief Marshal Sir Charles Burnett, KCB, CBE, DSO. IG of RAF 1939-40; Chief of Staff RAAF 1940-42. B. 3 Apr 1882. Died 9 Apr 1945.

influences". At meetings during the following five days, when White and his colleagues of the navy and air force presented detailed proposals, it was decided to form a fourth A.I.F. division if the British Government agreed and equipment was available, and at the same time to train and equip a home defence force of 250,000 men, including the 30,000 to 40,000 of the A.I.F. who were likely to be under training in Australia. It was estimated that there were then 75,000 in militia units, 37,000 men of the A.I.F. in Australian camps, and about 38,000 in the "returned soldiers' reserve" and the militia reserve.

The graver the news from France the more rapidly the number of recruits for the A.I.F. increased. The former doubts whether the war would be decided without bitter fighting on land had vanished.[4] By 6th June recruits for the new formations reached 25,000, by the 27th 50,000, by 25th July 82,000 and 13,000 were awaiting medical examination—though only 1,836 officers had applied and been accepted to fill 2,429 vacancies.[5] Thus the ranks of the two new divisions had been filled and there were 50,000 men over, more than enough to form a fourth and fifth division. The Cabinet decided to suspend recruiting for the time being.

Gross enlistments from the militia to the A.I.F. (said Mr Menzies in a public statement on 19th July) have left the militia divisions for the moment considerably below strength and it is necessary now to bring the militia up to its proper strength. In the view of the Government its next task will be to raise the militia force to greater strength, and to make arrangements for equipping such a force and giving it adequate camp accommodation. This task will come before the formation of additional A.I.F. units.[6]

Thus the Government again found itself being pulled in two directions in consequence of the existence of two armies—the volunteer oversea force and the (chiefly) conscript militia—and of two objectives—to contribute forces to the British pool and to build up an army to meet possible attack by Japan. After a lag of a few weeks while men who had already offered were enlisted—32,524 are recorded as having completed their enlistment in August—the numbers fell spectacularly. Only 1,049 enlisted in September, 995 in October, 1,028 in November, and most of these were evidently men who had offered themselves in July or earlier and been deferred.

The crisis had brought an ardent response also from the veterans of the old A.I.F. In May and June, at the suggestion of the Returned Soldiers' League, the Government extended its army reserve to provide that the league should organise a Returned Soldiers' League Volunteer Defence Corps on the lines of the British Home Guard.[7]

[4] Also the Government enlarged the field of enlistment by raising the upper age limit to 40 and reducing the height to 5 feet. In 1939 the minimum limit had been 5 feet 6 inches. In the previous war the minimum, originally 5 feet 6 inches, had been reduced inch by inch until, in April 1917, it reached 5 feet.

[5] In June 1940 48,496 men enlisted; in July 1915, after news of heavy casualties at Anzac, 36,500 enlisted.

[6] *Argus* (Melbourne), 20 Jul 1940.

[7] As early as 1937 the League had asked the Minister for Defence to raise a national defence force from among the veterans, and in March 1939, during the militia recruiting campaign, a comprehensive plan for the formation of army reserves was approved which included provision for recruiting, under the auspices of the League, of garrison battalions formed of men aged 45 to 60, and it will be recalled that such battalions had been formed on the outbreak of war. The later history of the VDC is told in Vol V of this series.

On the 16th June the French Government asked for an armistice, and on the 18th the last British troops embarked from France. The British Army had to leave nearly all its guns, tanks and vehicles behind. It became evident that for many months the British factories on which Australia had hitherto relied for the future supply of all but a few types of weapons would be fully and strenuously employed re-arming the forces in Britain. White informed the War Cabinet that although Australia had "a few" medium guns, and the old 18-pounder field guns and 4.5-inch howitzers—but not in great quantities[8]—and a fair equipment of medium and light machine-guns, she had none of the new 25-pounder guns, no anti-tank guns, no tanks, few carriers, and few anti-tank rifles. Each week 170 rifles[9] and twenty Vickers machine-guns were being delivered, but no Bren guns would come from the Australian factory before the end of the year. There were thirty 3-inch anti-aircraft guns of an out-dated type, but the new 3.7-inch guns were now coming from the factory at Maribyrnong at the rate of one a week. All engines and chassis for army vehicles had to be imported, only bodies and some spare parts were made in Australia.

From the beginning of the war a multitude of problems had proceeded from the fact that Australia was unable to equip her armies from her own factories. The size of her expeditionary force, the organisation of that force and of the militia, the A.I.F's destination, and many of the problems its commander was to face in the Middle East derived from a fundamental flaw in Australian policy, namely failure to recognise that effective defence depended on a nation's ability to manufacture arms. It needed this crisis to bring home the fact that, until this foundation had been laid, Australia's ability to defend herself must steadily diminish in relation to the military power of an enemy which did possess adequate factories; and that any overseas force she formed could consist only of men who must be equipped by her allies. In the sudden excitement of impending danger the tendency of the Government of a nation unprepared for war is to fill the ranks of its forces, to vote larger sums for the fighting Services, perhaps to take a census of men and wealth and materials. Until many months have been spent on planning and training, experiment and manufacture, such measures produce little more than lists of figures which, though they may comfort the citizens of the undefended nation, are likely to make no impression upon the probable aggressor, who knows how laborious has been his own progress towards military efficiency. In Australia even the shock produced by the outbreak of war had been insufficient to seriously disturb habits of thinking about defence acquired during twenty years. It has been shown above that after September 1939 there was still a tendency to seek methods of defence that would not be over-expensive in men and money; to leave the manufacture of arms

[8] There were, however, 307 18-pounders and 105 4.5-inch howitzers, enough to provide each of the seventeen field artillery regiments of the militia with twenty-four guns.

[9] Australia had accepted an order from the United Kingdom for 40,000 rifles. To meet this and the local needs production was being stepped up to 700 a week.

chiefly to Britain, from whom Australia would buy only what she needed; to give a few months' training to the army and then allow it to disperse to its peaceful occupations; and to limit equipment to a training scale. The German invasion of France and the Low Countries produced a notable change in policy, though it was not until the nation had been at war for two years and two months that it began to take the step which most European nations had taken as a matter of course, year by year, in time of peace, namely to establish a full-time conscript army.

The Ministers, now realising that their modest plans for manufacturing munitions would not meet the demands of the new situation, on 21st May had appointed Mr Essington Lewis,[1] chief general manager of the Broken Hill Pty Ltd which with its subsidiaries controlled Australian iron and steel production, to be Director-General of Munitions Supply with "the greatest possible degree of freedom from ordinary rules and regulations". In the meantime the Government was doing what it could to send equipment to England from its meagre store. On the 14th May it had decided to dispatch 35,000,000 out of its reserve of 90,000,000 rounds of small arms ammunition, and, later, to send another 35,000,000 rounds of small arms ammunition and some hundreds of thousands of four types of shells and mortar bombs which were being made in Australia.[2] In response to a later appeal from London Mr Menzies informed the High Commissioner there on 13th June that Australia could provide for the Second A.I.F., Vickers machine-guns, rifles, a number of articles of clothing, and certain engineer and signal equipment; from August, 3.7-inch anti-aircraft guns would be delivered at the rate of four a month until a total of fifty was reached, 3-inch mortars would be supplied from November, carriers—deliveries of Australian-made carriers had begun in March—would be provided for the 7th and later divisions and, within a year, 100 Bren guns a month.

A disaster occurred on 13th August when an aircraft carrying to Canberra the Vice-President of the Executive Council (Sir Henry Gullett), the Minister for the Army (Mr Street), for Air (Mr Fairbairn[3]), the Chief of the General Staff (General White) and six others crashed and all were killed. This accident robbed the Ministry of White's exceptional wisdom and experience and took three members whose knowledge of warfare was practical and wide: Gullett who had been a soldier and a war correspondent in the earlier war and, after it, had written a brilliant military history; Street who had followed distinguished service as a young infantry officer in 1914-18 with senior militia appointments between the wars; Fairbairn who had served as an air force pilot. A Ministry which in 1939, when

[1] Essington Lewis, CH. Dir-Gen of Munitions 1940-45 and Dir-Gen Aircraft Production 1942-45. B. Burra, SA, 13 Jan 1881.

[2] Details of plans for munitions production, the effects of the crisis on the navy and the air force, the political and economic effects of these events and their impact on the people are described in other volumes of this history.

[3] Hon J. V. Fairbairn. (1914-18: RFC 1916-17.) Min for Civil Aviation 1939-40 and for Air 1940. B. Wadhurst, Surrey, Eng, 28 Jul 1897. Killed in aircraft accident 13 Aug 1940.

R. G. Casey was also a member, had been exceptionally rich in leaders with military experience became unusually weak in such men.[4]

In January when the first convoy sailed Australia's military contribution to the Allied strength in Europe had been fixed at only one division. It had now been expanded to a corps of four divisions. This was a far smaller force than Australia had maintained in France and Palestine in 1916, 1917 and 1918. On the other hand, if all of it was sent promptly to the Middle East, it was likely to form the strongest single contingent in that theatre, on the Allied side.

[4] Street's place as Minister for the Army was taken by Senator McBride, who was succeeded in October by Mr P. C. Spender, an energetic Sydney barrister. White was replaced by General Sturdee, who, between 1933 and 1939, had occupied senior general-staff appointments at Army Headquarters.

CHAPTER 5

AFTER THE FALL OF FRANCE

THE surrender of France and the entry of Italy had transformed the situation in the Mediterranean. Formerly the French fleet had offset the Italian, and the French armies in Africa, combined with the British, placed Allied military strength on approximately an equality with the Italian there. If the French fleet and the French colonies had continued to resist after the surrender of metropolitan France the scales would still have been heavily weighted against Italy. But, when most of the French leaders at home and abroad accepted the terms of the armistice, the western basin of the Mediterranean was left open to the Italian fleet until Britain could assemble a force to dispute it. Italy could now concentrate her Libyan armies on the Egyptian frontier, and the force, equivalent to about two divisions, which General Mittelhauser commanded in Syria and which had been counted on to support the Turks should Germany attack them, was lost to the Allies.[1] Propaganda had vastly exaggerated the strength of the Allied army in the Middle East and it seems doubtful whether Dominion statesmen, for example, realised how small it was either before or after the fall of France.

One of the most disturbing elements in the new situation from the point of view of the military commander was that the navy, now lacking bases in the central Mediterranean, except for Malta, could not guarantee to prevent the transport of Italian—and perhaps German—reinforcements to North Africa, and that the convoys bringing men and supplies from England to Egypt would probably have to travel by the Cape. It was estimated that, allowing for the time needed to re-train troops after the long voyage twice through the tropics in crowded transports, the use of the Cape route would add three months to the time taken by a unit to travel from England and be ready for action in Egypt. Indeed there was even a danger that the Red Sea route would be denied by the Italian air force in East Africa, and the overland route by way of Basra would have to be used.

The new situation was one which the British War Cabinet could hardly have foreseen, and there was little that it could do quickly to increase British strength in outlying areas. The British Ministers had sent to France every division that they had been able to equip, and more. The survivors of this force had returned to England with, at the best, the weapons that they could carry in their hands. In England, also, the Royal Air Force was facing an inevitable and decisive contest with the German Air Force, and could spare no reinforcements. It was evident that, in the immediate future, the military defence of the Middle East would have to depend

[1] A Polish brigade, formed in Syria of troops who had escaped through the Balkans, made its way to Palestine, and enough French troops joined the British forces to form an infantry battalion and a cavalry squadron.

increasingly on forces from India and the three Dominions east and south of Suez.

The control of British policy now rested chiefly on the shoulders of one man—Winston Churchill, the new Prime Minister. When Chamberlain dropped the reins Churchill inherited a system under which responsibility was widely and variously distributed; but it was not difficult for this learned, confident and autocratic leader to establish a highly-centralised machinery for the conduct of war.[2] The portfolio of Minister for the



The Head Man

David Low, in the London "Evening Standard".

Coordination of Defence had been abolished in April 1940. In May Churchill added the title Minister for Defence to that of Prime Minister. He established a "Defence Committee (Operations)" consisting of himself as chairman, a small group of ministers, and the Chiefs of Staff; this committee examined plans prepared by the Chiefs of Staff and made decisions on behalf of War Cabinet. A post-war review of the system said that "the duties of the Prime Minister as Minister for Defence were never defined. It was left for Mr Churchill to develop a method of working, through the Defence Committee and the Chiefs of Staff Committee, which

In *The Second World War*, Vol. I (1948), p. 464, Churchill described the old system as one whereby after "a copious flow of polite conversation . . . everything is settled for the greatest good of the greatest number by the common sense of most after the consultation of all."

enabled him to provide the drive without which warlike operations cannot be conducted . . . . He used as his staff the small military Secretariat of the War Cabinet, which had previously served the Committee of Imperial Defence."[3] The duties of the Committee of Imperial Defence, an advisory not an executive body, had already been taken over at the outbreak of war by the War Cabinet then established. It was desirable that executive power should be concentrated in a central authority—Britain's unpreparedness was a result largely of lack of a unified policy—and it was fortunate that there was in England a politician as resolute and knowledgeable as Churchill, itching to take up the German challenge.

No responsibility was too heavy for him; no detail too small. The memoranda which he distributed daily among his subordinates sometimes gave directions on high strategical policy, but as often contained pronouncements on items of equipment, training, tactics, or even grammatical usage. In his directives on operations in the Middle East, for instance, he was to give instructions about the movement and equipment of individual units and sub-units.[4]

To consider the problems of the relatively remote Middle Eastern theatre Churchill set up a Ministerial Committee of the Secretary for War (Mr Eden), for India (Mr Amery) and the Colonies (Lord Lloyd), "all experienced in war and deeply concerned in that theatre". To an Australian the absence is conspicuous of the Secretary for the Dominions, since it was on the Dominions that the area would now largely depend for its military defence.

Indeed the new system left the problem of cooperation with the Dominion Governments, who controlled one-third of the Anglo-Saxon citizens of the British Commonwealth, where it had been before. In the words of the post-war review quoted above this cooperation was maintained as hitherto by "a very close touch between the Governments of the Commonwealth not only by telegraphic means but by constant meetings between ministers, officers and officials on all levels." This generalisation does more than justice to the liaison between, for example, the Australian Army and the War Office, which was in fact maintained from June of this year until January 1941 by a relatively-junior ordnance specialist with the rank of temporary lieut-colonel and with an office at Australia House.[5]

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[3] *Central Organisation for Defence,* Command Paper 6923, Oct 1946.

[4] See W. S. Churchill, *The Second World War,* Vol. II (1949), pp. 379-380—his directive to Wavell in August 1940; and pp. 596-7—a memorandum on Kenya and the Sudan in which he interests himself in the movement of a single battery of artillery.

[5] He was Maj (later Brig) J. K. Coffey, whose liaison letters reveal that he was well aware of the need for a more senior Australian representative in London at this time. When war broke out Col W. Bridgeford was liaison officer at Australia House. In June he was appointed to command the 25th Brigade of the AIF then being formed in England and Col J. H. F. Pain was sent from Australia to replace him. Pain became seriously ill and returned to Australia, where he died soon after arrival. Coffey carried on until Col A. W. Wardell was appointed in Jan 1941. In 1942 Wardell was transferred to liaison duties with the British Chiefs of Staff organisation and Coffey again replaced him until, in August 1942, it being recognised that more senior representation and a larger staff was needed, Lieut-General E. K. Smart, a former Quartermaster-General, was appointed. Throughout the war the liaison office performed a multitude of duties and in particular was responsible for securing the allocation of arms, equipment and stores of all kinds required by the Australian Army from United Kingdom sources. By late in 1944 this staff included some 15 officers, not counting another 15 attached to the British Army, a large prisoner-of-war reception group, and 20 attending advanced technical courses.

A first necessity was to meet the new challenge to British sea power in the Mediterranean, and to that end Churchill sent a battle squadron commanded by Vice-Admiral Somerville[6] to Gibraltar to fill the gap left by the French fleet, now lying inactive. And, in the eastern Mediterranean, Admiral Sir Andrew Cunningham, though he led a force that included only three battleships, against Italy's five, promptly demonstrated that he did not intend to surrender the central Mediterranean to superior weight of metal. On 11th June he began a sweep towards southern Italy with his battle squadron while two cruisers shelled Tobruk, the main Italian fortress on the coast of Cyrenaica. These forays failed to entice the Italian fleet to attack.

There still remained the fear lest the French fleet or a substantial part of it should fall into German hands. The British Cabinet decided to take drastic measures and on 3rd July, having failed to persuade its commander to come to terms, Admiral Somerville fired on and disabled most of a powerful French squadron at Mers-el-Kebir in Algeria. At the same time the commander of a French squadron of one battleship and four cruisers at Alexandria was persuaded to discharge the fuel oil from his ships and in other ways render them harmless. Later in July Cunningham's fleet, which was at sea covering a convoy from Malta, saw the Italian battle fleet and engaged it at long range, whereupon the Italians made off while a strong force of aircraft made heavy but unsuccessful high-level attacks on the British ships. Thus, within a month, British naval ascendancy in the Mediterranean was firmly re-established.

The entry of Italy increased the British leaders' anxiety about the internal security of Egypt whose Prime Minister, Ali Maher Pasha, was unsympathetic towards Britain, and whose King was under strong Italian influence.[7] The Egyptian problem was complicated by the existence of an Egyptian army of 30,000 men which, though poorly led and weak in mobile artillery, nevertheless possessed more anti-aircraft artillery than the British forces and was "in many respects much better equipped than most of the British forces".[1] Consequently General Wavell had to be ready at short notice to use part of his force to take control in Cairo and Alexandria. The internal situation in Egypt was greatly improved from the British point of view when, in June, the King was persuaded to appoint as Prime Minister, Hassan Sabri Pasha, a former Ambassador to Britain and an Anglophile. In Palestine neither Jews nor Arabs seemed likely immediately to alter their cooperative attitude because of France's surrender and Italy's entry against Britain. Wavell recognised, however, that the strong anti-

[6] Admiral of Fleet Sir James Somerville, GCB, GBE, DSO, RN. Comd Force "H" in Medit 1940-42; C-in-C Eastern Fleet 1942-44. Of Somerset, Eng; b. 1882.

[7] Count Ciano, the Italian Foreign Minister, had written in his diary on 23rd February 1939: "Attolico (Italian Ambassador to Berlin) has sent a very interesting account of his conversation with the Egyptian Minister to Berlin, Mourad Pasha. He speaks in the name of his King, who declares himself to be anti-British, and asks whether, in the event of Egypt proclaiming her neutrality and Great Britain attempting to intervene, directly or indirectly, the Axis will be ready to support King Farouk."

[1] A. P. Wavell, *Despatch on Operations in the Middle East, Aug 1939 to Nov 1940.*

British element in Iraq, encouraged by Britain's misfortunes, might upset a situation that for the time was "unsatisfactory but quiescent".

Although a trickle of reinforcements had been reaching him in the eight months since October 1939, Wavell now possessed, in Egypt and Palestine, only one armoured division and one cavalry division (both not fully equipped), two infantry divisions—the 4th Indian and 6th Australian, both incomplete—and part of the New Zealand Division (little more than a brigade group). There were also nineteen British battalions, including elements of the 6th British Division, but only three were brigaded and there were only two unattached artillery regiments—not enough to make it possible to create a British infantry division on the spot. In Kenya were two brigades of East African native troops soon (in July) to be reinforced by two brigades of West African natives; in the Sudan three British battalions and twenty locally-raised companies; in Somaliland an African battalion and five local camel companies. On the other hand the Italians were then believed to have about 250,000 troops in Libya, and 200,000 in Abyssinia.[2]

The shortage of artillery and engineers, which made it difficult to form even one United Kingdom infantry division in the Middle East, was partly due to an inherent defect in the British Army system. In peace about half of that army was employed on colonial garrison and police duties for which a normal allotment of artillery was not required; and, since the Indian Mutiny, the precaution had been taken of including very little Indian field artillery in the Indian Army. Consequently, in the early stages of the war, there was not enough artillery to go round, and, in the Middle East and India, large numbers of fine regular infantry battalions could not be formed into effective divisions for lack of artillery and other technical troops. This waste of splendid fighting units was extremely puzzling to colonials. These were the infantry battalions which they regarded as then the best in the world, and they were largely frittered away on garrison duty when they might have been formed into divisions of outstanding quality if technical troops had been sent out from England to support them. In London then and later Churchill bombarded the War Office with sharp complaints about "the shocking waste of British Regular troops on mere police duty" in the Middle East and India.[3]

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[2] In June 1940 the garrisons of the areas under Wavell's command numbered approximately:

Egypt	36,000	Palestine	27,500
Sudan	9,000	Aden	2,500
Kenya	8,500	Cyprus	800
Somaliland	1,475		
	Total 85,775		

[3] When Britain was threatened with invasion Churchill also urged that regular troops from India should be replaced by Territorials and return to Britain, and that regular troops from the Middle East be replaced by Indians. "In the last war," he wrote to Eden on 6 Jun, "not only did we have all the (British) Regular troops out (of India) in the first nine months, but also an Indian Corps fought by Christmas in France. Our weakness, slowness, lack of grip and drive are very apparent on the background of what was done twenty-five years ago. I really think that you, Lloyd and Amery ought to be able to lift our affairs in the East and Middle East out of the catalepsy by which they are smitten." He added that he was prepared also to consider as an alternative to the return of eight British battalions from Palestine, or, as an immediate step, "the sending home (i.e. to Britain) of the rest of the Australian corps. Perhaps you will let me have a note of this, showing especially dates at which the moves can be made." (Churchill, Vol. II, pp. 145-6.)

In the air Air Marshal Longmore's[4] force, which included six squadrons in the Western Desert, three in the Sudan, three in Kenya, four at Aden, and nine elsewhere in Egypt, was greatly outnumbered by the Italian, and possessed no fighter aircraft more modern than the Gladiator biplane.[5] In Egypt and Palestine Longmore had a frontline strength of 168 aircraft against an estimated Italian strength of 400 in Libya. In Sudan, Kenya and Aden he had 85 against 170 Italian machines in Abyssinia. What it lacked in numbers and equipment the British force made up in skill and spirit, however, and, early on the morning of Italy's declaration of war, had bombed all Italian aerodromes within range, destroying or damaging hangars and aircraft and setting fire to petrol dumps.

It was likely that, because of the tropical rains which fell in Abyssinia from early July to September, Wavell and Longmore would have time to re-deploy their forces before a serious Italian attack began; and in the Western Desert it was improbable that the Italians would attempt large-scale operations in high summer. Wavell ordered General Dickinson[6] in Kenya and General Platt in the Sudan to put small and mobile forces astride the main routes leading out of Abyssinia with orders to fight delaying actions should the Italians advance in strength. In July superior Italian forces drove the Sudanese outposts from the frontier settlements of Kassala and Gallabat, thus severing the Khartum-Port Sudan railway, and in Kenya two Italian brigades drove a company of the King's African Rifles (an East African native regiment) from a similar post at Moyale. However, the rainy season had descended and Wavell believed that the Italians would not make a major attack until it was over. In the meantime he proposed to send to the Sudan an Indian brigade due to arrive in August.

Wavell had counted upon at least hampering the Italian force in Abyssinia by assisting those Abyssinian tribes who were still resisting the occupation, but the Foreign Office, fearful lest the Italian dictator be offended, had prevented him from sending agents into the country. On the eve of Italy's declaration of war, without having consulted Wavell, it arranged for the exiled Emperor Haile Sellasie to travel to Egypt, having first given him the impression that he would be supported with large forces of troops, tanks and guns. For some time after his arrival it was necessary for the Emperor to remain at Khartum, somewhat disillusioned by the discovery of the true position, while a small mission of British officers and some 300 to 400 armed Abyssinian refugees were sent across the border to reconnoitre and to encourage the rebels.

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[4] Air Ch Marshal Sir Arthur Longmore, GCB, DSO. AOC-in-C RAF in ME 1940-41; IG of RAF 1941. Regular airman; of Wentworth, Surrey, Eng; b. St Leonard's, NSW, 8 Oct 1885.

[5] In *From Sea to Sky* (1946) Longmore complained that as part of the effort to win over the Balkan dictators aircraft urgently needed by British squadrons were sold to them. In mid-1940, when the only truly modern fighter in the British force in the Middle East was one Hurricane being tested there, Hurricanes had been delivered to the Turks, and some of the latest Blenheims to Greece and Rumania. He added "Modern aircraft may be useful political weapons, but they are better in the hands of those who can use and maintain them properly."

[6] Maj-Gen D. P. Dickinson, CB, DSO, OBE, MC. GOC East Africa Force 1939-40. Regular soldier; b. Swansea, Sth Wales, 6 Nov 1886. Died 8 Jan 1949.

A more immediate threat to the Nile Delta was offered by the Italian Army in Libya, which, after the death of Marshal Balbo whose aircraft was shot down over Tobruk by Italian guns in June, was commanded by Marshal Graziani. Graziani was one of those who won his marshal's baton in the operations in Libya and Abyssinia.[7] The administrative work in the forces he had commanded in both countries was considered to be efficient, but there were signs that he himself lacked confidence and drive; and his only opponents so far had been ill-armed and ill-organised Africans. Nevertheless, he and his subordinates had acquired more experience of motorised warfare in the arid north and east of Africa than British commanders had been able to.

Wavell's staff believed that Graziani commanded, in Tripolitania, the *Fifth Army* (General Gariboldi), which included eight Italian divisions and perhaps one Libyan; and, in Cyrenaica, the *Tenth Army* (General Guidi), of four Italian divisions[8]—the *62nd (Marmarica), 63rd (Cyrene), 3rd Blackshirt (21st April), 4th Blackshirt (3rd January)*—the *1st Libyan,* composed chiefly of native troops, and perhaps part of the *2nd Libyan.* Wavell believed that the Italians might dare to drive his covering force back from the frontier, but, because of the difficulties of supply, he doubted whether they could make an effective attack into Egypt without the support of German armoured forces and German organisation. "If the Germans do support them with armoured forces, and perhaps parachutists and airborne troops," he wrote, on 26th July, "we may be faced with a stiff battle on the western frontier, in which we shall be very greatly outnumbered in the air." He estimated that two armoured and three infantry divisions would be needed to meet such an attack.

Between the Italian Army and the Nile delta lay 240 miles of desert which received only enough rain to support scattered clumps of low, spiny scrub. Its surface consisted generally of fine clay subsoil, often sprinkled with stones; here and there were patches of fine sand. From the Egyptian side a railway reached out into the desert as far as Mersa Matruh, an ancient seaport town of about 6,000 people, and thence a bitumen road travelled west to the village of Sidi Barrani. From Sidi Barrani an earth road continued to Salum, a small harbour near the Italian frontier. There the 600-foot escarpment, which, to the east, lay generally twenty or thirty miles from the coast, touched the sea. West and south of Salum this escarpment was climbed by two principal tracks leading into Cyrenaica,

[7] In the subjugation of the Libyan Arabs and later in the suppression of unrest in Abyssinia he had ordered large-scale killing of rebels and suspects. The smouldering revolt in the Gojjam province of Abyssinia, of which British forces were already beginning to take advantage, was believed to owe most of its heat to the actions of Graziani who, after he had been wounded by a bomb in Feb 1937, is said to have ordered the killing of 9,000 natives including monks, the burning of churches, and the deportation of every Abyssinian who had received a foreign education.

[8] Italian divisions normally included only two infantry regiments—six battalions—compared with the three brigades—nine battalions—of a British division; and possessed only 36 field guns compared with 72 in a British division. The Blackshirt militia divisions, of which there were four in Libya, were somewhat weaker than the divisions of the army proper. The army divisions were given a number and the name of the district to which they belonged, in the manner of Roman legions (for example, *63rd Cyrene*); the Blackshirt divisions were given a number and were named after some important date in Fascist history (e.g. *3rd, 21st April*).

one mounting the escarpment above Salum to Fort Capuzzo and the other travelling through the Halfaya Pass, six miles south of the port. Along the frontier, from the sea coast to the edge of the Great Sand Sea south of Giarabub, the Italians had erected barbed wire entanglements twelve feet wide whose principal object was to enable them to control the Bedouin caravans. On the Italian side a first-class road ran from the settled and fertile area near Benghazi to Fort Capuzzo. However, lack of water rather than lack of roads and railways was likely to impede military movement in the intervening desert. Between Mersa Matruh and Tobruk, seventy miles within the Italian frontier, there were few wells, and their capacity was limited. Around the railhead and water supply of Mersa Matruh the British Army had, since 1939, been digging and wiring a strong system of defences. The Italians on their side had built two elaborate fortresses, one an arc of strong posts round Bardia on the coast just across the frontier; the other round Tobruk.

Until the development of efficient motor vehicles, the desert was an imposing obstacle to the movement of large armies. In the past twenty years, however, the mechanical movement of large forces across open and flat or undulating country had been made possible by the improvement of tanks and the development of wheeled vehicles of more rugged build and greater power. Even so, the wear and tear on vehicles in the desert was of an entirely different degree to that suffered in well-roaded areas. The life of a track of a tank or carrier on the sandy, stony ground was only 1,500 to 2,000 miles, the life of an engine relatively very short, and the consumption of spare parts correspondingly high.

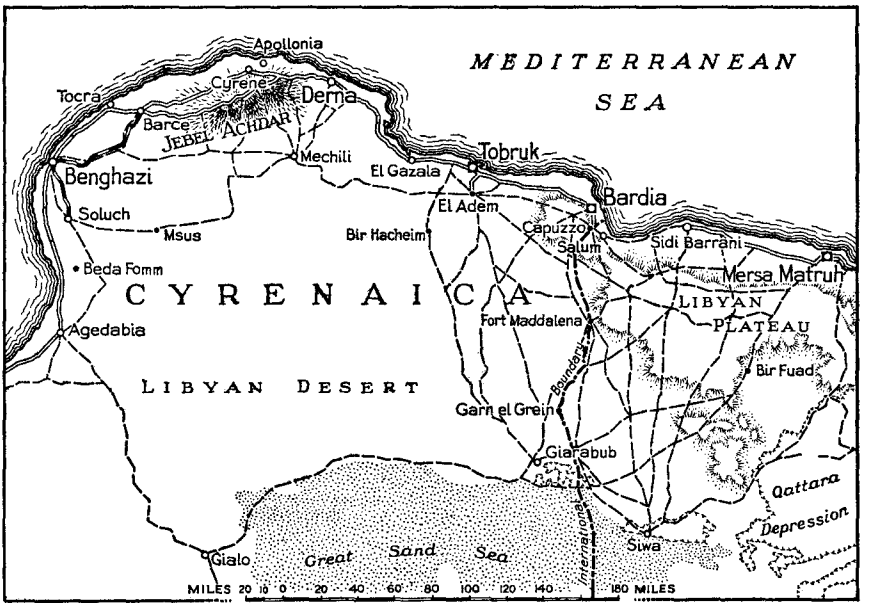
Wavell's general plan in the Western Desert was one formulated before his arrival: to regard Mersa Matruh for the present as his main centre of resistance and allow the enemy to advance so far without offering strong opposition. Thus the enemy might be drawn forward into the almost-waterless desert and at length an opportunity would present itself of hitting him hard while he was at a disadvantage. Nevertheless (as in Abyssinia) Wavell decided to post a small force on the frontier to harass the enemy. The command of all British troops in Egypt belonged to General Wilson and until June the 7th Armoured Division (General Creagh[9]) was directly under his control. In that month, however, the political situation in Egypt was so uncertain that it was not considered practicable for Wilson directly to command the formations in the Western Desert and General O'Connor,[1] formerly commander of the 6th British Division, formed "Western Desert Force", comprising the 7th Armoured Division, the Matruh Garrison (chiefly the 22nd British Brigade), the 5th Indian Brigade, and some units of the New Zealand Division.

O'Connor gave the task of harassing the Italians to a force drawn from the armoured division and consisting of a light tank regiment (7th

[9] Maj-Gen Sir Michael Creagh, KBE, MC. GOC 7 Armd Div 1939-41. B. London, 16 May, 1892.

[1] Gen Sir Richard O'Connor, GCB, DSO, MC. Comd WDF, XIII Corps 1941, VIII Corps 1944; GOC-in-C Eastern Comd, India 1945, North-Western Army, India 1945-46. Regular soldier; b. Kashmir, India, 21 Aug 1889.

Hussars), an armoured car regiment (11th Hussars), two motorised infantry battalions and two artillery regiments. These were composed of expert and confident regular troops who knew the desert and what their equipment could do, and they immediately began making damaging forays into Cyrenaica. On the night of the 11th June (Italy had declared war on the 10th) the 11th Hussars cut their way through the frontier wire and, after a skirmish, took seventy prisoners. Three days later the 7th Hussars occupied Fort Capuzzo and the 11th Hussars took Fort Maddalena and patrolled to the Bardia-Tobruk road. On the 16th a squadron of the 11th



Hussars established an ambush on the Bardia road, killed twenty-one men, took eighty-eight prisoners, including General Lastucci, chief engineer of the *Tenth Army,* and destroyed forty vehicles, without losing a man. In an action on the 16th a force including a tank and an armoured car squadron and some anti-tank guns killed or captured 148 Italian troops and destroyed seventeen Italian light tanks. By July, the situation seemed temporarily to have been stabilised both in the Sudan and in the desert.

Thus, when General Blamey and Brigadier Rowell arrived in Palestine from Australia on 20th June they came not to the training area of a force intended for the Western Front, but to a theatre of operations in which their troops might be called on to go into action at short notice. Blamey's corps consisted only of a nucleus headquarters, some corps troops and the incomplete 6th Division. The 7th Division in Australia included only two brigades, which had been training for about a month. The 18th Brigade, with some troops of the 6th Division, was in England. Therefore one of

Blamey's most pressing problems was to complete the organisation and equipment of the 6th Division. When he arrived it was still short of a regiment of field and a regiment of anti-tank artillery and several engineer, medical and maintenance units. There was neither a pioneer nor a machine-gun battalion, each of which was normally attached to a division in battle. To complete their equipment the units which were in Palestine needed, to take some examples, twenty-four field guns or howitzers, 283 light machine-guns (out of a total establishment of 569), 222 anti-tank rifles (the units had about six each), 1,060 binoculars, 948 prismatic compasses, 120 telephones, 120 miles of electric cable, 166 carriers and light tanks, 941 other vehicles. Each battalion had only four 2-inch mortars instead of twelve; for the twenty-four artillery weapons with the division there were only eighty rounds of ammunition a gun. It had been possible to train a full battalion in mobile operations only by pooling vehicles so that battalions could use them by turns, and there was no substantial reserve of vehicles in the Middle East.

Soon after his arrival Blamey decided to send a trusted staff officer, Colonel Ronald Irving, to Melbourne to explain the equipment shortage and to press for a statement of policy. Irving flew to Melbourne where, after a discussion with General White, he prepared a paper for the Minister in which he said that the Australian division might be called upon "to fight for its very existence at any moment" and was in no state to do so. The threat to Britain and the temporary closing of the Mediterranean sea route would for an indefinite period prevent it obtaining fighting equipment from the United Kingdom. It was urged, therefore, that an immediate decision be made to provide what equipment could be spared from Australian resources, and, particularly that ninety Australian-made Vickers and 116 Lewis guns be dispatched so that at least the infantry would be armed, if only with last-war weapons. As a result of this mission it was decided that the remaining artillery, engineer and other units of the 6th Division be dispatched as soon as possible, even if they lacked some weapons, but opinion was against the two A.I.F. divisions in Australia going abroad until the possibility of Japan entering the war had diminished. However, the prospect of obtaining equipment other than rifles and machine-guns from Australian factories was improving. It was expected that the first 2-pounder anti-tank guns would be delivered in October, and two batches each of 200 transport vehicles were being loaded into transports; it was decided to equip the 6th Division as far as possible from Australian sources, though not to send away Lewis guns from Australia's small stock. Small numbers of Vickers guns, anti-tank rifles, mortars, pistols, carriers and ammunition were sent to Palestine. Half the carriers produced by Australian factories were to go overseas and half to be kept in Australia.

In addition to commanding the Australian corps General Blamey was commander of the A.I.F., and it was because General White foresaw problems that would face him in that capacity that he had been anxious that he should go promptly to Palestine. In April Blamey had been

entrusted with the wide powers needed by the commander of a force which, though under the operational control of the British or Allied commander-in-chief in the theatre to which it was allotted, nevertheless was an independent force whose commander owed allegiance to his own Government. General Blamey's authority and responsibility were set out in the following charter based on that which had been drawn up in the war of 1914-18. It said:

(*a*) The Force to be recognised as an Australian force under its own Commander, who will have a direct responsibility to the Commonwealth Government with the right to communicate direct with that Government. No part of the Force to be detached or employed apart from the Force without his consent.

Questions of policy regarding the employment of the Force to be decided by the United Kingdom and Commonwealth Governments, in consultation; except that, in an emergency, the Commander of the Force may, at his discretion, take a decision on such a question, informing the Commonwealth Government that he is so doing.

(*b*) The Force to be under the operational control of the Commander-in-Chief of the theatre in which it is serving.

(*c*) Administration of supply services, and such other questions as are amenable to the adoption of a common system, to be controlled by the Commander-in-Chief of the Forces in which the Force is serving—subject to a financial adjustment between the respective Governments concerning the cost of such administration incurred by the British Government. All major financial questions, arising from the service of the Force abroad, to be reserved for direct discussion between the Commonwealth and the United Kingdom Governments.

(*d*) Administration of the Force in domestic matters to be the prerogative of the General Officer Commanding 1st Australian Army Corps, subject to general control by the Minister for the Army.[2]

A problem with which General Blamey had immediately to deal was the establishment of an administrative system adequate to the needs of a force which eventually was to number three or four divisions and a corresponding number of corps and depot troops; indeed was likely to become the largest homogeneous force in the Middle East. In May he had sent abroad Brigadier Wynter, his senior administrative officer, or D.A. and Q.M.G., with some of his staff, to examine the administrative organisation of the A.I.F., make such changes as he considered necessary, and at the same time to establish an advanced headquarters of I Australian Corps—as a young officer Wynter had held responsible positions in the administration of the old A.I.F. in France and London. Blamey had informed him that the Overseas Base should be moved from Jerusalem to a point nearer the point of entry of the Australians—Port Said, for example; and that he should prepare for the organisation of an A.I.F. administrative headquarters which would take over from the base such matters as records, pay, etc. In this way there would be established under Blamey as commander of the A.I.F. an administrative headquarters, commanded by

[2] In explanation of paragraph (*d*) the Minister in April issued the following direction making it clear that Blamey was not subordinate to the Chief of the General Staff:
"All instructions to the GOC 1st Australian Corps, will be issued from the Secretariat by direction of the Minister. The Minister will make such administrative use of the Military Board as he sees fit in connection with all AIF matters and the members of the Military Board may seek or send information *to related branches of the AIF* but anything in the nature of an order or an instruction to the Commander of the 1st Australian Corps should issue from the Secretariat as indicated above."

Wynter himself, which would control the domestic affairs of the force as a whole, and an Australian "base sub-area" with a small staff, including a canteens and Comforts Fund representative, mainly to receive and distribute reinforcements and supplies. The A.I.F. headquarters would control all domestic administration not in the hands of corps headquarters and would have charge of general hospitals when they were not in a theatre of war. At the same time the establishment of an A.I.F. depot containing reinforcement training units and convalescent depots was contemplated.

Wynter, however, and his nucleus staff had been in the "third convoy" which had been diverted to England, and in June he had been appointed to command the Australian force there. Consequently Blamey had to deal with this problem afresh. He transferred Brigadier Morris and his staff to Gaza, where his own headquarters were established, and removed Mackay's headquarters to Deir Suneid. The base came under the control of his corps staff, which was still in an attenuated form. It remained to set up a base organisation which would free the corps headquarters to train for action in the field. With this in view he later instituted a new organisation whereby a Deputy Adjutant-General, A.I.F. (Brigadier Andrew[3]) was made responsible directly to Blamey as G.O.C., A.I.F., for the control of records, pay, audit and "questions of general domestic administration of the A.I.F."[4] In November, Brigadier Boase,[5] hitherto senior administrative officer of the 7th Division, was appointed to command "Base and Lines of Communication Units." But the corps staff was not fully freed from administration of static units, having still to control the general organisation of the A.I.F. and the training of reinforcements.[6]

In September, in anticipation of the large number of reinforcements who were due to arrive in Palestine in that month and October, General Blamey ordered the formation of a training depot containing a training battalion for each infantry brigade, an artillery training regiment and a training regiment of reinforcements for cavalry and other units. Each infantry training battalion was to contain a company of reinforcements for each parent unit, which would provide its officers. Each unit, therefore, would be responsible for the training of its own reinforcements to the extent that its own officers, temporarily seconded, would have commanded those reinforcements in the training period. Thus, one by one, rear

[3] Brig B. J. Andrew, VX13755. (1st AIF: 12 Bn and S/Capt 3 Inf Bde 1916-17.) DAG Admin HQ AIF ME 1940-41. Regular soldier; b. East Melbourne, 15 Oct 1894. Died 28 Apr 1941.

[4] The principal officers of Corps headquarters were, in Aug 1940: *BGS* Brig S. F. Rowell; *GSO2 (Ops)* Lt-Col H. G. Rourke; *GSO2 (Int)* Lt-Col R. G. H. Irving; *AQMG* Lt-Col C. E. M. Lloyd; *DDMS* Col S. R. Burston; *ADOS* Col L. E. Beavis; *APM* Maj J. Walstab; *CCRA* Brig C. A. Clowes; *GSO2 (Arty)* Lt-Col H. F. H. Durant; *CCMA* Brig A. H. Ramsay; *CE* Brig C. S. Steele; *CSO* Col C. H. Simpson; *AD of Svy* Lt-Col A. S. Wilson; *AD of S & T* Brig D. D. Paine.

[5] Lt-Gen A. J. Boase, CBE, NX366. (1st AIF: Maj 9 Bn.) AA&QMG 7 Div 1940; Brig i/c Admin Base & L of C Units ME 1940-41; Comd 16 Bde 1941-42 and GOC AIF Ceylon 1942; MGGS First Army 1942-43; GOC 11 Div 1943-45. Regular soldier; of Brisbane and Sydney; b. Gympie, Qld, 19 Feb 1894.

[6] Brigadier Morris, who had established the overseas base, had in August been appointed Australian liaison officer at Bombay, the main port of call of Australian convoys on their way to the Middle East.

organisations were established, but a result of Blamey's tardiness in freeing his corps headquarters from administration of the A.I.F. as a whole was that the corps headquarters, as such, were never exercised until February 1941.

It will be recalled that one provision of General Blamey's charter was that no part of the A.I.F. should be detached or employed apart from the main force without his consent. It was likely, as General White had foreseen, that efforts would be made to detach parts of the Dominion forces, particularly in the early stages of the war when the Allies were weak and every commander was compelled to improvise; and Blamey had been in Palestine only a fortnight when there arose one such problem for the solution of which the Government and its advisers relied upon him. On 3rd July Wavell asked Wilson, Blamey and Brigadier Puttick,[7] commanding the 4th New Zealand Brigade, to meet him in Cairo "to discuss re-grouping of units in formations", and sent them a draft order of battle which predicted the formation of "Egypt Corps", consisting of the 7th Armoured Division, the 4th Indian, the Matruh Garrison (a British brigade group) and a "6th Australian Division" which, in the draft, consisted of the 16th Australian and 4th New Zealand Brigades, with the Australian divisional cavalry regiment, artillery and other troops. In reserve, under Wavell's immediate command, were to be grouped the 17th and 19th Australian and the 16th British Brigades. The intention was that an improvised division for service in Egypt and the desert should be formed from the two Dominion brigades which were farthest advanced in training and equipment. Puttick immediately cabled this proposal to his commander, General Freyberg,[8] who was in England with the second contingent of his division. Freyberg's response was characteristically prompt and emphatic. On the 4th he cabled Wavell:

> Have just received your proposals for reorganisation with its repercussions upon the New Zealand Expeditionary Force in Egypt. As no such change can be made without the approval of the New Zealand Government, I hope these proposals will not be proceeded with. I do not wish to disclose to the New Zealand Government the proposals as outlined by you to break up the New Zealand Force, as they would make a most unfavourable impression in New Zealand official circles with repercussions you probably have not foreseen. The answer to any such proposals would, I am sure, be an uncompromising refusal.

These were very strong words—"break up the New Zealand force", "most unfavourable impression", "uncompromising refusal"—but, at the outset, and in terms that could hardly have been more emphatic, they reminded Wavell and his staff that Dominion commanders had a responsibility for keeping their forces intact, and had the right of appeal to their

[7] Lt-Gen Sir Edward Puttick, KCB, DSO. (1914-18: CO 3 Bn NZ Rifle Bde.) Comd 4 NZ Bde 1940-41; GOC NZ Forces and CGS NZ 1942-45. Regular soldier; of Wellington, NZ; b. Timaru, NZ, 26 Jun 1890.

[8] Lt-Gen Lord Freyberg, VC, GCMG, KCB, KBE, DSO. (1914-18: Comd Hood Bn, RN Div 1916 and 1917, 173 Bde 1917, 88 Bde 1918-19.) Comd 2 NZEF 1939-45. Gov-Gen of New Zealand since 1946. Regular soldier; of London; b. London, 21 Mar 1889.

Governments.[9] At the conference next day, a new organisation was agreed upon under which the Egypt Corps included separate Australian and New Zealand groups, Blamey agreeing to the detachment of his brigade only on condition that it was fully equipped.

Before this reorganisation had been carried out the question of detaching troops, this time solely from the Australian force, arose again. As soon as General Blamey arrived in the Middle East he had agreed to earmark a brigade for police duties in Egypt should a political crisis demand it, and he detailed the 16th for the duty. On 13th August he learnt from Wavell's headquarters that now that the brigade had been allotted to the Egypt Corps, the 17th had been detailed for the "security" task (that is to say, the 6th Division was to lose not one but two of its brigades) and that the 17th had been placed on a higher priority for equipment than the 16th Brigade. Blamey replied to this proposal in terms only a little less emphatic than Freyberg's of six weeks before:

> I am most anxious (he wrote to Wavell on 13th August) to give you every help and backing in your very difficult task, but in view of the very definite agreement between the British and Australian Governments for the employment of the A.I.F. as a single force, and the instructions of the Commonwealth Government to me in this matter, I must ask for the fullest details of the proposals before I can give consideration to the question of further detachment.

He pointed out that if the second detachment was made the 6th Division would be split into three parts, one in the Western Desert, one in Cairo and one in Palestine, all working under different commands. He repeated a request which he had made earlier that the headquarters of the division be included in the Egypt Corps, a proposal that had been rejected because of the shortage of signal equipment. If this were done the division could be completed in the Western Desert as equipment for the remaining brigades became available. Blamey took the opportunity of urging that transport and equipment be issued to the division. The 6th Division, he said "must have training with the full scale (of transport) before it can be considered ready to take the field. I am very loth to allow this Force out of my control until I am assured of its fitness for the task involved, and I am very certain that the Commonwealth Government will demand this of me. If I am correctly informed, this equipment is available." The outcome was that the 6th New Zealand Brigade which had arrived in Egypt on 29th September was, from 13th October, allotted the role of reserve for internal security, leaving the 17th Australian available eventually to join the 16th west of the Nile Delta.

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[9] Freyberg and Blamey, though now holding comparatively junior commands, not only had a responsibility to Dominion governments but were very senior soldiers in their own right. Freyberg though now only a divisional commander had, at the time of his retirement from the British Army in 1937, been senior to Gort (who had commanded the BEF in France), to Brooke (the C-in-C in Great Britain) and little junior to Wavell. In 1918 Blamey and Freyberg had both been senior in rank to these three, as they then were to other British and American commanders under whom they served from 1940 onwards.
A series of memoranda and telegrams on the New Zealand policy concerning detachments is printed in *Documents Relating to New Zealand's Participation in the Second World War*, Vol. I, pp. 182-207.

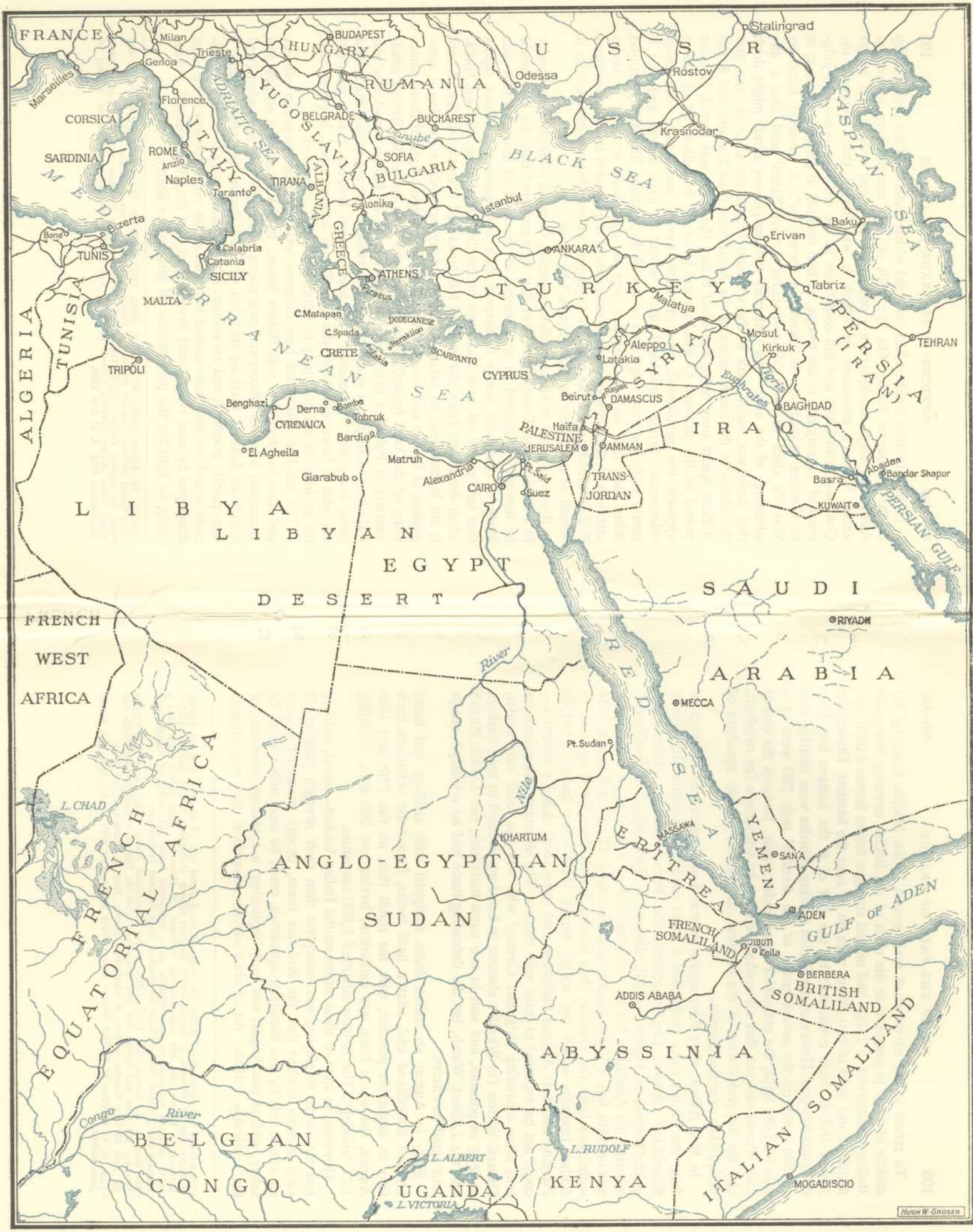
In July another incident had occurred which underlined the individuality of the Dominion forces. On the 26th of that month there arrived at Australian corps headquarters a copy of a proposed order to all troops under Wavell's command in which it was stated that, although the Commander-in-Chief had full confidence in the common sense and judgment of the majority of the troops, he had decided to prohibit listening in to German broadcasts "in recreation rooms etc". A covering letter by Wavell's chief of staff, Major-General Arthur Smith[1] said that a disadvantage of the order was that men with suspicious minds might think that there was much truth in the German broadcasts after all, and that the wishes of the commanders of the Australian, New Zealand and South African forces were being consulted before the order was issued. Blamey passed on the proposal to Mackay and he to the brigadiers, all of whom opposed the prohibition, two of them, Savige and Allen, with some vehemence. Savige considered that it would be most unwise and that it would make the men suspicious of British Broadcasts. The always-candid Allen said that he felt that this was an opportune moment to invite attention to the frequent obvious omission of unpalatable information from B.B.C. broadcasts. "The men are beginning to feel that our information is almost as inaccurate as the German," he wrote.

Blamey's reply to his immediate superior, General Giffard,[2] commander in Palestine and Transjordan, was that he considered that the ban would be unwise. He quoted as an example of the kind of omission that was likely to cause his troops to suspect their own news the official report that one empty oil tank had been hit in the first Italian raid on Haifa, when the troops knew that several full tanks had been set on fire. Would it not be possible, he asked, to issue a daily news sheet showing a comparison of British and enemy communiqués? He contemplated doing something of the kind himself. Finally an order was issued by British headquarters in Palestine that tuning-in to German or Italian broadcasts was forbidden in all places where communal wireless sets were used, the reason given being that "dissension" had been caused between troops who did not wish to listen and those who did. Blamey was informed, however, that the prohibition did not apply to troops under his command.

The incident illustrated how different were relations between officers and men in Dominion and British forces. In the Dominion armies any distinction between officers and men above what efficiency demanded (and it did not demand marking stretches of Gaza Beach "for officers only") was quickly resented; and an attempt to prevent listening to enemy broadcasts would not only have caused indignation but very probably have been disobeyed by men who would have argued that they had enlisted, voluntarily, to fight for the preservation of just such a liberty.

[1] Lt-Gen Sir Arthur Smith, KCB, KBE, DSO, MC. CGS ME 1940-42; GOC-in-C Persia and Iraq Comd 1944-45. Regular soldier; of Pirbright, Woking, Eng; b. 8 Dec 1890.

[2] Gen Sir George Giffard, GCB, DSO. GOC Brit Forces in Palestine and Transjordan 1940; GOC West Africa 1940-41; C-in-C 11 Army Gp in SE Asia 1943-44. Regular soldier; of Winchester, Eng; b. 27 Sep 1886.


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KUWAIT
PERSIAN GULF
Bizerta
Bone
TUNIS
TUNISIA
ALGERIA
Calabria
Catania
SICILY
MALTA
ATHENS
Piraeus
C. Matapan
DODECANESE
C. Spada
Heraklion
Sitakia
SCARPANTO
CRETE
MEDITERRANEAN SEA
TRIPOLI
Benghazi
Derna
Bomba
Tobruk
CYRENAICA
Bardia
El Agheila
Matruh
Giarabub
Alexandria
CAIRO
Pt. Said
Suez
CYPRUS
LIBYA
LIBYAN
EGYPT
DESERT
SAUDI
ARABIA
RIYADH
MECCA
RED SEA
Pt. Sudan
Nile River
FRENCH WEST AFRICA
L. CHAD
FRENCH EQUATORIAL AFRICA
KHARTUM
ANGLO-EGYPTIAN
SUDAN
MASSAWA
ERITREA
YEMEN
SANA
ADEN
GULF of ADEN
FRENCH SOMALILAND
JIBUTI
Zeila
BERBERA
BRITISH SOMALILAND
ADDIS ABABA
ABYSSINIA
ITALIAN SOMALILAND
MOGADISCIO
Congo River
BELGIAN CONGO
L. ALBERT
UGANDA
L. VICTORIA
L. RUDOLF
KENYA
HUGH W. GROSER

To return to the narrative of main events in the Middle East: by the middle of July, in response to the raids of the British covering force, the Italian commander in Libya had moved stronger forces forward until two divisions and units of two others were on or near the frontier. During the month British raids continued; by the end of it the Italians had four divisions forward. However, the British fighting vehicles were wearing out; of 306 tanks on the establishment of the division[3] only 200 were as a rule with the units, the remainder being under repair. Towards the end of July Wavell ordered that all tracked vehicles be withdrawn for overhaul, and the Support Group of the division, augmented by one squadron of tanks, took over the frontier.

In East Africa, after their minor successes at Kassala and Gallabat in July, the Italian force undertook a more ambitious venture. In French Somaliland General Legentilhomme, the French military commander, unlike Nogues in Algeria and Mittelhauser in Syria, remained belligerent, ignoring the Armistice, but he was overruled by a meeting of his Council and on 15th July a Vichy general took command. The French troops were withdrawn from the frontier, thus leaving British Somaliland open to an Italian invasion which the scanty forces there—one Indian (1/15th Punjab) and two African battalions and some local camel companies—could not be expected to resist with success. The situation was precarious but, after consulting Brigadier Chater,[4] who was the local commander, General Wilson (in Wavell's absence in London) decided to hold Berbera as long as possible, and sent in two more battalions, the 3/15th Punjab and the 2/Black Watch, but the defending force had no artillery,[5] except four small howitzers.

Early in August an Italian force equipped with artillery and tanks invaded Somaliland and, after a hard battle, forced the defenders back into an untenable position, with the result that, on the 17th and 18th August, the whole force was embarked, having lost 260 men, including 120 "missing". The Italians admitted 1,800 casualties.

However, in spite of these successes the Italian leaders—naval, military and air—were displaying less enterprise than their strength justified. It soon became evident that the Red Sea route, though protected against air attack only by two Blenheim squadrons, could be used with reasonable safety, and, in late August and early September, a squadron, consisting of the battleship *Valiant,* the aircraft carrier *Illustrious,* and two cruisers

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[3] Throughout this period the 7 Armd Div included the 4 Armd Bde (7 Hussars, 6 Royal Tank), 7 Armd Bde (8 Hussars, 1 Royal Tank), Support Group (1/KRRC, 2/Rifle Bde, 3 RHA—anti-tank, 4 RHA), and one armoured car regiment (11 Hussars). There should have been a third armoured regiment in each brigade; as is mentioned below the additional regiments—3 Hussars and 2 Royal Tank—joined the division from England in October.

[4] Maj-Gen A. R. Chater, CB, DSO, OBE. Comd Somaliland Force 1940; Comd Tps Cyprus 1940-41; Mil Gov and Comd Tps Brit Somaliland 1941-43; Dir of Combined Ops India and SE Asia 1944-45. Regular soldier; of Camberley, Surrey, Eng; b. London, 7 Feb 1896.

[5] Capt H. L. Howden of HMAS *Hobart* sent a 3-pdr gun ashore and, on 13 Aug, two Bofors guns arrived.

escorted a convoy from the west to Malta, where it joined Admiral Cunningham's force and proceeded to Alexandria.[6]

Meanwhile the Australian brigades had been moving nearer the scene of action. In the first half of September the 6th Division less the 19th Brigade moved to Helwan camp near Cairo to complete its training and equipment. It had been there less than a fortnight when the problem of detachments arose again. Wavell had agreed that the 16th Brigade should have one month's training with full transport and equipment before being used for an operational role, but, before half that time had passed, orders were issued by Wilson's headquarters that it move to Amiriya on the edge of the Western Desert. Blamey at once signalled to Mackay that the brigade was not to move without his authority, and repeated the signal to Wilson's headquarters. Wavell was then in London; two days later his headquarters in Cairo signalled that Wavell had consulted Churchill and insisted that the move be made.

Blamey agreed to allow Rowell, his chief of staff, to visit Wilson's headquarters bearing a copy of Blamey's charter. Rowell had a stormy interview with Brigadier Galloway,[7] Wilson's senior staff officer, and left him the charter to read, emphasising the need for appreciating the peculiar circumstances in which a Dominion commander was placed in that he had a responsibility both to his Government and to his local commander; and pointing out that, in the present instance, Blamey had informed his Government that the brigade would have one month of training with full equipment. Later in the day Galloway changed his attitude; the brigade did not move until October. The incident illustrates that neither the British Prime Minister (admittedly one who was not always particularly adept in his dealings with Dominion Governments), nor a Commander-in-Chief of a force which included contingents from three Dominions, nor a field commander chosen for appointments in which a combination of diplomatic and military talents were demanded, nor his chief of staff realised that none of them could insist on such an instruction being carried out by a Dominion commander.[8]

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[6] In their air attacks on Egypt and Palestine the Italians were a little more enterprising. One of Wavell's minor anxieties was the defence particularly of Alexandria and Haifa against Italian air attack, specially in view of the fact that, with the exception of some guns at Alexandria, Port Said and Port Sudan, all the anti-aircraft equipment in the Delta area and the Western Desert was manned by the neutral Egyptian Army which might refuse to fire on Italian aircraft. Consequently crews for coast defence and search-light units were formed from New Zealand and Yeomanry units, and General Blamey agreed that the 2/1 Fd Regt and the 2/4 Bn should move to Haifa for instruction on the anti-aircraft guns there, a decision that was the easier to make because there were guns only for one of the two Australian regiments in Palestine. Hitherto the 2/1 had had the twenty-four obsolescent guns that had been brought from Australia; now they were given to the 2/2. In order to distribute the trained gunners between the anti-aircraft regiments one battery of the field regiment joined the infantry battalion and two companies of the battalion joined the artillery regiment. The outlook improved when the Egyptian gunners fired energetically at the first and later Italian aircraft that raided Alexandria. Nevertheless the Australians were still training at Haifa on the morning of 15th July when forty Italian aircraft bombed the oil tanks there, setting fire to four tanks. A second raid, which was ineffective, was made on 24 July.

[7] Lt-Gen Sir Alexander Galloway, KBE, CB, DSO, MC. BGS Brit Tps Egypt 1940-41, Greece 1941; Comd 23 Brit Bde 1941. Regular soldier; b. 9 Nov 1895.

[8] In October General Freyberg felt compelled to write to Galloway protesting emphatically against detachments from his division and enclosing a copy of his charter.

Reinforcement of Egypt had been made the more necessary because the unwieldy Italian force in the Western Desert, where, since July, Brigadier Gott's[9] Support Group of the 7th Armoured Division had been sparring with it, was moving forward. At Bardia or east of it the commander of the Italian *Tenth Army,* was now believed to have two metropolitan divisions—the *62nd (Marmarica)* and the *63rd (Cyrene)*—as well as the *1st* and part of the *2nd Libyan;* in the Derna-Cyrene area were three more divisions. On 10th September an enemy column of about 500 vehicles began to advance, and by the morning of the 11th reached a point a few miles west of Sidi Omar. In the evening the leaguered vehicles at Sidi Omar were attacked by a small column of British tanks and guns, and vehicles and petrol were set on fire. On the 13th the Italian force advanced behind a creeping barrage and occupied Salum. In the Halfaya Pass a company of the 3/Coldstream[1] with detachments of artillery and machine-guns held up the Italian advance for some hours and withdrew in good order. Gott had expected the Italians to make a flanking move well south of the coast and had concentrated most of his small force south of the escarpment, leaving only the Coldstream battalion and some artillery on the coast. For four days the Italian army advanced along the coast, constantly harried by the Coldstream and the gunners. They did not attempt a flank move, though they possessed a strong force of tanks, but appeared to be advancing in column with two divisions leading, behind a screen of motor-cyclists, tanks and lorry-borne guns and infantry. At night the force would disperse itself in leaguers with searchlights ready to illuminate the surrounding country if a raid was attempted. When, on the 17th, the column reached Sidi Barrani, after having advanced about twelve miles each day, it halted and began to establish itself in a series of camps which offered all-round defence, at El Maktila, Tummar, Nibeiwa and Sofafi, the line of camps forming a shallow arc running north-east to south-west. In these camps and in the area immediately west of them lay an army estimated at five infantry divisions, two being of Libyan troops, and one armoured group, equal to a division.

In the three months since the declaration of war Graziani thus gained some sixty miles of territory but his published casualties since June were 3,500 and he had lost 700 prisoners. The 7th Armoured Division had only 150 casualties. The operations had revealed that the Italian leaders—except in the artillery, which was often well-handled—were poor tacticians and lacked confidence, and their men possessed little spirit; at the same time they had provided a useful exercise for the British regulars and an encouragement to their dash and self-esteem. It had been a war of professionals against amateurs.

We now know that Graziani undertook this advance only after repeated instructions from Mussolini. On 8th September Ciano wrote in his diary: "Never has a military operation been undertaken so much against the will of the commanders." The Italian field force

[9] Lt-Gen W. H. E. Gott, CB, CBE, DSO, MC. Comd Support Gp 7 Armd Div 1940-41; GOC 7 Armd Div 1941, XIII Corps 1942. B. 13 Aug 1897. Killed in aircraft accident 7 Aug 1942.

[1] The Coldstream had been added to the Support Group, increasing its infantry to three battalions.

was commanded by General Bergonzoli and consisted of the *XXI Corps* (*62nd* and *63rd Divisions* and *1st* and *2nd Libyan Divisions*); the *XXIII Corps* (*1st* and *2nd Blackshirt Divisions*); the *Libyan Tank Group* of seven tank battalions; and the *Maletti Group*, a small mobile force. At the outset the tank group led the way, the infantry following, with tanks and artillery guarding the flanks. The advance to Sidi Barrani was led by the tank group on the right and the *2nd Blackshirt* on the left.

Meanwhile, in August, Wavell had been summoned to London to discuss his problems with the Ministers and the War Office staffs. Churchill had not met him, and in the past two months had been issuing memoranda that contained sharp criticism of Wavell's employment of his forces. "The discussions, both oral and written", wrote Churchill later concerning the London meetings, "were severe"; and he added[2]:

> The command in the Middle East at that time comprised an extraordinary amalgam of military, political, diplomatic, and administrative problems of extreme complexity . . . . While not in full agreement with General Wavell's use of the resources at his disposal, I thought it best to leave him in command. I admired his fine qualities, and was impressed with the confidence so many people had in him.

Churchill told Wavell that he considered that excessive forces were being kept idle in Kenya, which should be held "with the settlers and the K.A.R."; the South Africans and West Africans should be transferred to the Delta. There were too many troops in Palestine. He declared to Wavell:

> I do not understand why the Australians and New Zealanders, who have been training in Palestine for at least six months, should be able to provide only one brigade for service in Egypt. How many of them are there, and what are the facts of their training? These men were brought at great expense from Australia, having been selected as the first volunteers for service in Europe. Many of them had previous military training, and have done nearly a year's training since the war broke out. How disgraceful it would be if owing to our mishandling of this important force only one brigade took part in the decisive operations for the defence of Egypt!

In the following days Churchill sent Wavell a series of communications which displayed one of his defects as a leader—his eagerness to lay down the law on details that were in the province of the man on the spot. Churchill's military experience had been varied but shallow; his intense interest in the details of the profession of arms was not backed by adequate schooling in the everyday problems of a military commander. He questioned Wavell's statement that armoured forces and vehicles could move as easily on the desert as on the road—a fact that the operations of recent weeks should have sufficiently demonstrated. Finally he wrote a directive in which he proposed a re-deployment of Wavell's force, battalion by battalion, and gave detailed instructions for the tactical employment of the force in the Western Desert.[3]

Of greater value to Wavell was a promise of some useful reinforcements, including another Indian division—the 5th—the two regiments of cruiser

[2] Churchill, Vol. II, p. 376.
[3] Churchill, pp. 379-82.

tanks to complete his armoured division, and a battalion of infantry tanks or "Matildas", designed to support infantry in a set-piece attack. Anxious to reduce his commitments by disposing of the blockaded Italian force in Abyssinia Wavell now made the bold decision to allot the Indian division to General Platt in the Sudan and instructed him to plan an attack there. At the same time, soon after his return from London, he instructed his joint planning staff to prepare for an advance in the Western Desert; and he ordered Wilson and O'Connor to counter-attack as soon as the Italian advance reached Mersa Matruh.

In September renewed fear of a German invasion of England had caused Churchill to delay the sailing of some of the small reinforcements allotted to the Middle East; however, in October the British Cabinet, now less anxious about the prospect of invasion, decided that should yet another month pass without it, the Middle East would be reinforced to the utmost extent shipping permitted. If possible one British division would be sent before Christmas and at least four in the first three months of 1941. Wavell was told (on 11th October) to assume that he would receive "25,000 per month from the United Kingdom, and, by March 1941, a further division and a brigade group from Australia." Therefore, in the middle of October Wavell decided that he would launch a brief, swift-moving offensive lasting only four or five days and, when the enemy force had been defeated, would withdraw the main part of the Western Desert Force on to his railhead at Mersa Matruh. He discussed this proposal with the Secretary for War, Mr Eden, who visited Egypt in that month. Mr Eden and later Mr Churchill (who learnt of the plan on Eden's return) promised their support, Churchill declaring that "all acts and decisions of valour and violence against the enemy will whatever their upshot, receive the resolute support of His Majesty's Government".

Consequently, on 20th October, Wavell instructed Wilson to consider simultaneous attacks by the 4th Indian Division westwards against the Italian camps east of Sidi Barrani and by the 7th Armoured Division against the Sofafi camps. Both Wilson and O'Connor, however, considered the country round the Sofafi camps too rugged for frontal assault and wished to attack the centre of the enemy's position—the Tummar and Nibeiwa camps held by the *2nd Libyan Division*—and, advancing thence to Buq Buq, to cut the communications of the main enemy force. O'Connor proposed that the attack on the central camps be made by the 4th Indian Division and the newly-arrived 7th Royal Tank Regiment, with its heavy tanks, whose strength the Italians had not yet felt, while a force from the Mersa Matruh garrison advanced to Maktila to divert the enemy's attention from the main attack. The 7th Armoured Division was to engage any enemy columns attempting to intervene from the north-west, west or south-west, and moving through the enemy's line between Nibeiwa and Sofafi to exploit towards Buq Buq to destroy the enemy's services in the rear; finally it would cover the withdrawal of the 4th Indian Division to Mersa Matruh. General Creagh of the 7th Armoured Division was ordered to

ensure that the enemy built no fortified camp in the gap before the attack opened. O'Connor's plan was adopted. It remained to fix the date.

In the meantime, however, Mussolini was preparing to take a step that would profoundly affect the shape of the war as a whole, and, incidentally, the destiny of the force with which this narrative is chiefly concerned.

From the outbreak of war onwards Mussolini's decisions followed those of Hitler in accordance with the pattern set in April 1939, when, envious of Germany's success in occupying Czechoslovakia, he overran Albania. Thus, as we have seen, while the German armies were seizing France, Mussolini attacked France's lightly-held south-eastern frontier, and urged his timid commander in North Africa to invade Egypt. The Egyptian venture made slow progress. From July onwards the German staffs gave consideration to reinforcing the Italian North African army with German armoured troops, and in October Mussolini declined a definite offer of a German armoured force. Later in that month, General von Thoma, in the course of a report on a tour of inspection in Libya said: "Everyone is scared of the British. The two opponents barely touch each other . . . . What the Italians are afraid of is that the arrival of German troops might cause the British, who meanwhile have been considerably reinforced, to become more active."[4]

Meanwhile, in July and August, still in search of an easy victory, Mussolini had made a series of complaints to Greece, alleging that she was behaving in an un-neutral fashion; and on 15th August an "unidentified" submarine, so the Greek Government announced, torpedoed and sank the Greek cruiser *Helle* which was lying in the harbour of Tenos bedecked with flags for the Feast of the Assumption. Thereupon Mussolini was sharply warned from Berlin that an invasion of Greece would be unwelcome to the German leaders; he was told that their combined efforts must be concentrated against Britain. Mussolini accepted this counsel until September, when Germany completed a diplomatic offensive against Hungary and Rumania which resulted in those States becoming virtually her vassals. Again jealous and resentful, Mussolini decided to balance these bloodless German victories by occupying Greece. At first he was resolved to tell Hitler nothing about his plans, but his vexation cooled and on 19th October he wrote to Hitler warning him of his intention, yet without naming the date, although he had already arranged that his Minister to Athens would hand General Metaxas, the Greek dictator, an ultimatum at 3 a.m. on the 28th of that month.

This decision was upsetting to Hitler and his subordinates, who were anxious for the time being to avoid military commitments in the Balkans, which they were in process of mastering by diplomatic means. On 17th

[4] These words are from a summary of von Thoma's report by General Halder, Chief of the German General Staff. Several quotations in this and later accounts of Italian military policy in this period are derived from *Axis Plans and Operations in the Mediterranean, Sep 1939-Feb 1941*, produced in 1950 by the Enemy Documents Section of the Historical Branch of the Cabinet Office of the United Kingdom, and generously distributed by that section to official war historians of the Dominions.

September Hitler had postponed his proposed invasion of England (which his naval leaders had always considered extremely hazardous in the face of British sea power). In that month the German High Command was considering instead a plan whereby, in cooperation with Italy and Spain, Axis forces would occupy all the shores of the Mediterranean. As a temporary expedient Russia, who was becoming increasingly antagonistic towards Germany's advance into the Balkans, would be encouraged to advance not into the Balkans but southwards, and gain an outlet to the Indian Ocean. In September, however, Hitler and General Franco, the Spanish dictator, failed to agree on the sharing of the spoils which they hoped an alliance would produce. In October Hitler turned to France in search of cooperation. On the 24th he met Marshal Pétain at Montoire in occupied France, and Pétain agreed that:

> The Axis Powers and France have an identical interest in seeing the defeat of England accomplished as soon as possible. Consequently, the French Government will support, within the limits of its ability, the measures which the Axis Powers may take to this end.[5]

Pétain, however, meant less than he said. The habitually timid, pessimistic French leader did not intend to enter the war, and evidently made this clear to Hitler. After the meeting Pétain, according to one report, said to a friend: "It will take six months to discuss this program and another six months to forget it."[6] Such was the situation when Mussolini wrote to Hitler mentioning the impending attack on Greece.

To the Greeks the Italian ultimatum would not be a bolt from the blue—Mussolini's newspapers had kept hostility to Greece simmering and had constantly threatened intervention ever since the occupation of Albania, thus maintaining a "strained situation" of which advantage could be taken at Italy's pleasure. So consistently was this war of nerves continued that on 5th September the British Foreign Secretary repeated Britain's guarantee to Greece and denounced Italy's "trumped-up charges" against her.

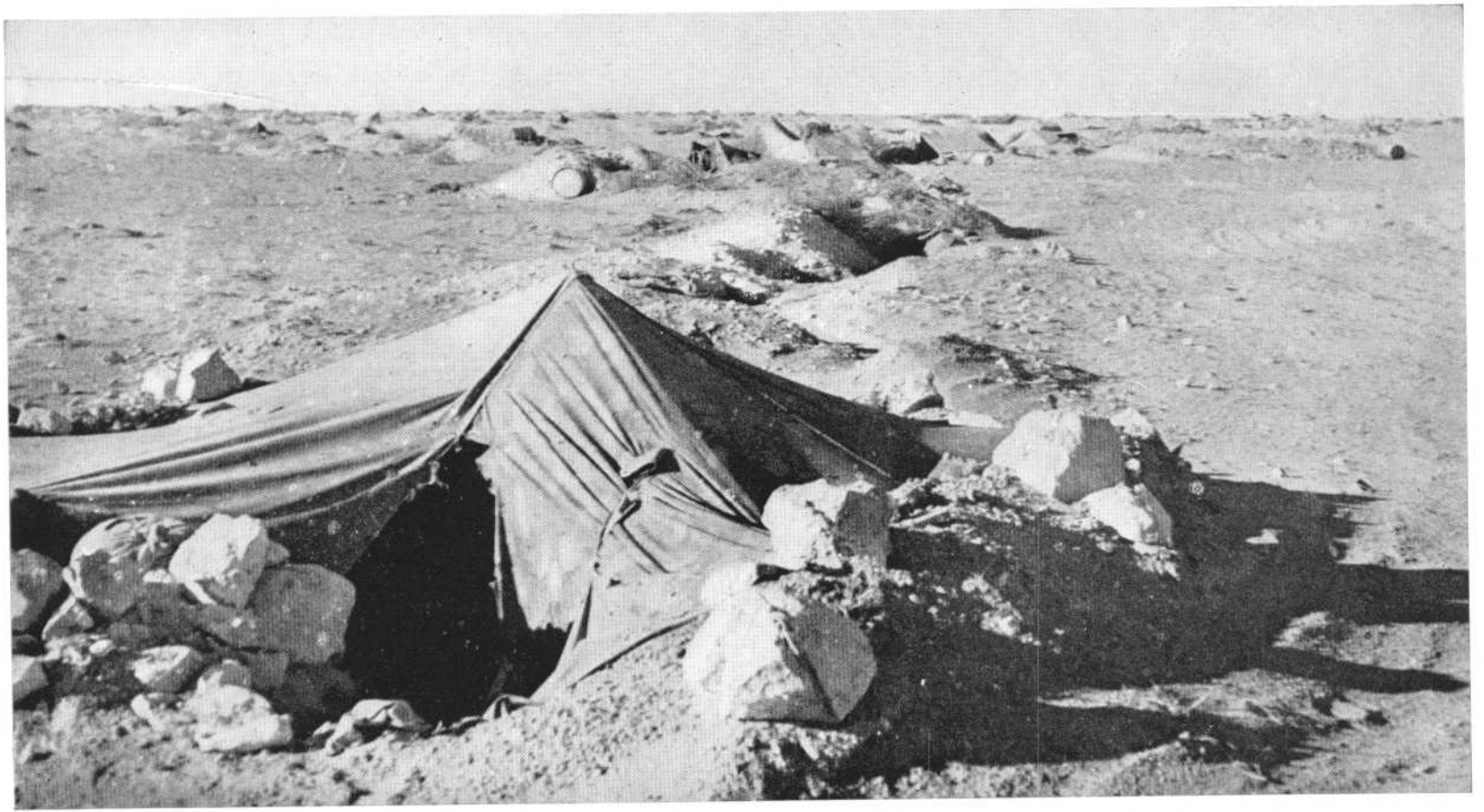
Most Australians in 1939 placed both Italians and Greeks in the same category of Mediterranean peoples. There were considerable colonies of both in the Commonwealth,[7] but few Australians were aware of the extent to which the two peoples had for centuries been separated by religious, cultural and political differences. The Greeks belonged to the Greek Orthodox Church; the Italians to the Roman Catholic. No European people had greater national pride or a more intense patriotic zeal than the Greeks; on the other hand twenty years of strenuous exhortation had failed to arouse even an average degree of patriotic fervour in Italian breasts. The Greek, with all his community spirit, was uncommonly individualistic and prone to party politics in their most violent form; the

[5] Quoted from a captured German document in *Our Vichy Gamble* (1947) by W. L. Langer.
[6] Stated in evidence at Pétain's trial.
[7] In 1933 there were 8,337 persons of Greek birth and 26,756 of Italian in Australia. The number of Greeks had doubled, of Italians trebled, between the census of 1921 and that of 1933.



(Australian War Memorial photo)

Infantry advancing with tanks and Bren carriers during exercises in the Western Desert, October 1940.



(New Zealand Official photo)

Italian lines at Tummar.

Italians had submitted easily to regimentation—"a race of sheep" their self-appointed leader called them. Mussolini's undisguised ambition was to create a new Roman Empire which, like its prototype, would include Greece; the Greeks regarded Italian ambition as the principal threat to their continued independence.

One reproach which Mussolini could not hurl at Greece was that Greece was one of the "effete democracies", because the Greece of General Metaxas was no more democratic than the Italy of Mussolini. Since August 1936 when Metaxas had persuaded the King to dissolve Parliament, he had ruled Greece as a dictator. He had imprisoned some thousands of his political opponents, censored the newspapers and the theatre, and established police rule. Here, one might imagine, was a minor dictator and a Germanophile whom the greater dictators could persuade, with bribes or threats (as they had persuaded others) to surrender his people to the Axis, but Metaxas was also a Greek and therefore a patriot, and it seems that the German-Italian alliance never considered it likely that they could suborn him.[8]

Throughout the eighteen months after the Italian seizure of Albania, Metaxas, well versed in the methods of his enemies, and a shrewd diplomat, pursued a consistent policy: to be meticulously neutral and to present an unruffled countenance to the noisy threats of Italy. In August, however, it seemed apparent that war was inevitable, and he approved the calling-up of some army reservists. On 15th October the Greek Minister in Rome warned Athens that Italy would strike in a matter of hours; on the 23rd he predicted that the blow would fall between the 25th and 28th.

At 3 o'clock on the morning of the 28th Metaxas was roused and told that the Italian Minister, Grazzi, wished to see him. Grazzi presented a Note complaining that Greece had tolerated the use of territorial waters by the British fleet, had connived at the refuelling of British air forces, had allowed a British Intelligence service to be established in the Greek archipelago, had reached understanding with Britain on military matters, had encouraged terrorism in the districts adjoining Albania and provoked frontier trouble. In consequence, Italy demanded the right to occupy strategical points in Greek territory; resistance would be "crushed by force of arms." Grazzi informed Metaxas that the Italian forces would advance into Greek territory at 6 a.m. Metaxas replied that he regarded the Note as amounting to a declaration of war and that Greece would resist the Italian invasion.[9]

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[8] In *European Dateline* (1946) Patrick Maitland, correspondent of *The Times* in the Near East in 1939-41, describes Metaxas as "a plump, hearty old man ready for anything. His face is square and his skin hung in the wrinkled folds of an old man. His hands were gnarled, his neck was crusty. He wore large tortoise-shell spectacles, a grubby Homburg hat, a shabby suit baggy at the knees, a prim butterfly collar and starched cuffs. At heart kindly, he was none the less ruthless, with the military man's idea of politics. He felt fairly deeply for the lot of the masses, resented their poverty, and was dedicated to reform of a kind. His ideology was pure fascism . . . ."

[9] When Grazzi returned to Rome he said that Metaxas was ready to yield, but became firm after having consulted the King and after the intervention of the British Minister, Sir Michael Palairet.

The Italian people received the news that they were at war with a new enemy with only artificial enthusiasm. No more could be expected from a community of whom Politis, the Greek Ambassador in Rome, had written, on the eve of Italy's entry into her war against France and Britain: "Public opinion, cowed and timid, fatalistically awaits the Duce's signal like a kind of death knell. The Duce . . . perfectly aware of the public's state of mind, is anxiously following the great battle in Flanders and awaiting his opportunity to score an easy victory." The Greeks, on the other hand, entered the struggle with probably a firmer resolution and a more widespread and deeper enthusiasm than any other people had done. The liberals, who had feared that Metaxas and his police would surrender to Italy, were surprised and elated when he rejected the Italian ultimatum as flatly as they themselves would have done. People flocked into the churches; to the Greeks both at home and abroad this was a war in defence of not only their country but their faith.

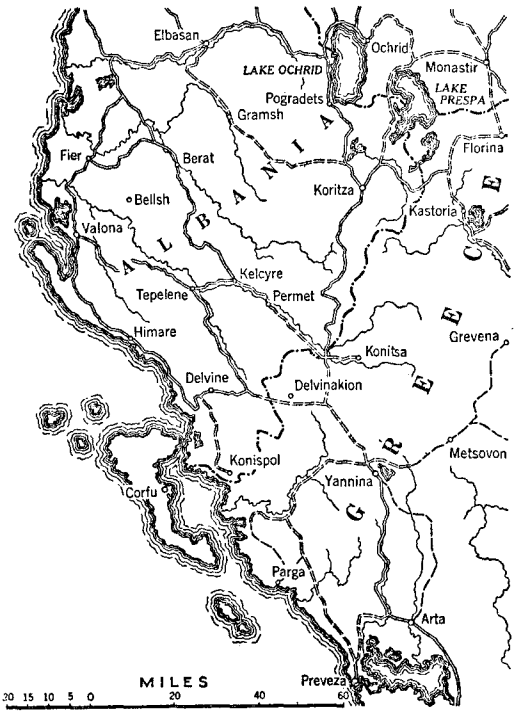
The army of Greece consisted of thirteen divisions of infantry and one of cavalry; the air force nominally of ten squadrons each of twelve aircraft. Backed by a united people, this army, if it had been organised and equipped to the standard reached in the German Army, or even the Italian, would have been a formidable force, because the men were hardy, well-trained so far as their equipment allowed (for each Greek soldier spent two years of full-time service). However, even by the standards of 1918, the men were ill-armed, at least for open warfare. Each division possessed only from 12 to 36 field guns (compared with 72 in a British division) and there were no anti-tank guns. For transport the army relied on mules and bullock waggons and the strong legs and backs of its men; and only a nucleus of the motor vehicles required by an army could be commandeered in a country which possessed few more than 8,000 motor load-carrying vehicles of all kinds. The air squadrons were equipped with a variety of machines, nearly all out of date. There were some British Blenheims, Ansons and Fairey Battles, some Polish and some French fighters, some German Dorniers and Henschels; all were short of spare parts.[1]

The frontier which this army had to defend was in the remote north-western mountains, most of it far beyond the railheads. The forces would be supplied along two main routes; those in the west, between the towering Pindus range and the sea, depended on supplies shipped to the small port of Preveza and thence trucked along the single road through Yannina; those east of the range were supplied along the single-track railway to Florina and thence by a road winding up into the Albanian mountains. Only one road, travelling over the 5,000-foot Metsovon Pass from Kalabaka to Yannina, connected these two lines of communication.

Although some reservists had been called up, the frontier was but lightly manned, because Metaxas had feared to provide the Italians with an

[1] By 2 Nov the effective Greek air force consisted of one squadron of eight Blenheims, one of eleven Battles, one of seven Potez 63's and four fighter squadrons each of from six to eight aircraft. By 15 Nov only six Greek fighters remained serviceable.

excuse by deploying an adequate force opposite the Italian army. At the outset General Pitsikas, the Greek commander in the field, had one division, the 8th, facing the equivalent of five Italian divisions in the Epirus sector; a regiment of Evzones—highlanders of the Greek *corps d'elite*—facing the *"Julia" Mountain Division* in the Pindus sector; and one division and a brigade facing three Italian divisions in the Koritza sector.[2] The Italian plan was to attack strongly on the west, taking Yannina the principal Greek base there and Metsovon, and thus cutting the road linking the Greeks in Epirus with the railway system of eastern Greece. In five days their infantry and armoured troops, advancing astride the road and at no great pace, were close to Yannina; and the *Alpini,* who, in obedience to an admirable plan, had moved up the roadless valley of the Aoos (Voioussa), were approaching Metsovon. On the 5th however the Greeks counter-attacked with great fervour, routing the *Alpini* north of Metsovon and driving back the Italian columns that were moving on Yannina. In nine days they thrust the Italians back across the Albanian frontier and captured much useful equipment, and, on the 22nd November, the Greek force on the Florina front, after a long fight, entered Koritza and began driving the Italians along the valleys leading towards Elbasan and Berat. By the end of November the Greeks had taken Pogradets, twenty miles north of Koritza, and, on the coast, were twenty miles within the frontier, and occupied perhaps one-fifth of Albania. Four of nine Italian divisions that had been engaged had been severely mauled; the Greeks had captured 135 guns, 20 tanks and 250 trucks.



It was a notable victory, the first that the Allies had achieved on land since the war began. The Greeks were elated. Their lightly-equipped army of hardy and confident men, who were able to offset their lack of transport by living on the most meagre rations, and to overcome their lack

[2] The Italian force in Albania was organised in two armies, the *Ninth* and *Eleventh*. At the outset General Visconti Prasca was in command. After the Greek counter-attack General Soddu took command, Prasca remaining in charge of the Epirus sector.

of heavy weapons by skilful infiltration tactics, had defeated substantial Italian armies and added considerably to their own equipment at Italian expense.

The defeat profoundly shocked the Italian oligarchy. Mussolini, in spite of his lack of confidence in his army, had expected that the Greek defence would collapse, but, before the first week had passed, the Italian commanders in Greece could see that failure was imminent and that it was the Italian army not the Greek which was in danger. Excited efforts were made by the Italian commander on the spot to find excuses: Badoglio, the Chief of the General Staff, had let them down; the Greeks had superior artillery; the rain had upset the Italian plan. This like each succeeding crisis revealed the weakness of rule by the irresponsible Italian clique in which the fate of each senior commander and official rested in the hands of the dictator, and demonstrated the lack of realism in Italian planning. The war had been undertaken out of vanity; defeats were bewailed not so much because they revealed weaknesses in the forces with which the State hoped to carry out its wishes as because the enemy would be able to splash them across the pages of his newspapers; accurate information was unobtainable in Rome because the object of each commander's reports was not to tell the truth but to advance himself and belittle his rivals in the eyes of the Duce.[3] Each national crisis was an opportunity for personal intrigue. Thus it was brought to Mussolini's ears that Badoglio had criticised the decision to challenge Greece (he had in fact been opposed to every step Mussolini had made), whereupon Mussolini announced that Badoglio had resigned because of ill-health and age and that General Ugo Cavallero would replace him.

The appointment of Cavallero shocked the Italian officer corps. He had spent most of the period between the wars in senior executive posts in large manufacturing companies, had been involved in charges of corruption, and was believed to have been saved from imprisonment only by the intervention of influential friends.

Early in December Soddu lost heart and advised Mussolini to seek a settlement with the Greeks, and Mussolini, angry and dejected, decided to ask the German leader to negotiate a truce, but later changed his mind. In December, after the Greek advance had been slowed down, he removed Soddu from the command in Albania and sent Cavallero there to conduct operations. Through subordinates he appealed to Berlin for help. However, Mussolini's action in attacking Greece, and his army's failure there had caused an increase in the growing coolness between the two allies. On 1st November Halder had noted: "Fuhrer very much annoyed at Italian manoeuvres in Greece. At present he is not in a mood to send anything to Libya or Albania. Let the Italians do it by themselves"; and, on 3rd November: "The Fuhrer stated that he had written off the whole Libyan affair." Later it was decided that the employment of German

[3] Ciano, on 19 Dec, wrote that General Soddu said one thing to the Duce another to the Chief of Staff. "For him the important strategy is not the one directed at the Greeks, but the one directed at the Palazzo Venezia."

forces would be considered, if at all, only when the Italians had reached Mersa Matruh, and such an advance would not be possible before the end of December.

Mussolini's attack on Greece had complicated Hitler's plan for mastering the Mediterranean to the extent that it would enable Britain to obtain a naval base in Crete and airfields in Greece. Nevertheless he continued during October and November to seek an agreement with Spain whereby Germany and Spain would make a combined attack on Gibraltar; and, on 12th November, he directed that preparations be made to occupy the northern part of Greece. Later in the month his staffs persuaded him that all Greece must be occupied.

What of the help which Mr Chamberlain had promised to Greece if she was attacked? The Chiefs of Staff in London had long been considering the possibility that they would be required to give support to Greece. In the early days of the European war they had stated as a settled policy that it was "unwise to repeat the mistakes of the last war and back up weak countries which were liable to be overrun before we could do anything to help them", and, somewhat later, on 31st May 1940, they had informed General Wavell that, because of their commitments elsewhere and their limited resources, there could be no question of Britain taking Greece under her protection. When Wavell had visited London in August, he attended a meeting of the Chiefs of Staff at which the question of Crete was discussed; Wavell explained that he had not even a brigade with adequate anti-aircraft artillery and air support available to occupy that island. During that month, when the Italian attitude towards Greece was becoming more menacing, the problem was again considered by the Chiefs of Staff and by their Joint Planning Staff, and the conclusion reached that, although failure to support Greece, if it resulted in acquiescence by the Greeks to Italian demands, would have grave consequences on British relations with Turkey and Yugoslavia, no forces could be spared to Turkey, Greece or even Crete until Egypt was secure; and, when direct inquiries were made by the Greek Government, it was informed that no British air forces could be sent. By October, however, Metaxas had become more confident; the danger of an effective Italian invasion of Egypt seemed to have passed; and Wavell had been promised substantial reinforcements from England. Consequently, the British attachés in Athens were empowered to discuss the defence of Crete, though forbidden to disclose the strength of the force Britain might employ there, and told that no support could be given to Greece on the mainland.

Such was the situation when the Italians invaded Greece. Eight days later, on 5th November, Mr Churchill announced in the Commons that "a new call had suddenly been made". He pointed out that Britain faced "one gigantic army" across the Channel, "another very powerful army" on the Libyan frontier. "We will do our best," he said. At the same time he was able to say: "We have most carefully abstained from any action likely to draw upon the Greeks the enmity of the criminal dictators. For

their part, the Greeks have maintained so strict a neutrality that we were unacquainted with their dispositions or their intentions."

Before Churchill spoke, the advanced party of a small British air force had already reached Greece. This force had been sent in response to a request by Metaxas on the day of the invasion for naval help in the defence of Corfu, air defence for Athens, and supplies. It was decided not to dispatch a naval force to Corfu where it would be exposed to Italian bombers, but before the end of October the Chiefs of Staff in London decided to send a military observer (Major-General Gambier-Parry[4]) to Greece; and in Egypt, on his own initiative, Air Marshal Longmore sent No. 30 Squadron, half Blenheim fighters and half bombers, to Athens; Mr Churchill congratulated him on this "bold and wise decision".

Meanwhile British troops had landed also in Crete. From April 1940 onwards proposals for the occupation of Crete had been considered by British (and, until June, also by French) leaders. On 21st May the Greek Government gave Britain permission to land troops at any Greek port if war broke out between Greece and Italy. In October, the British attachés, discussing the problem of Crete with the Greek staff, said that they could promise nothing then, but later a brigade might be available; the Greeks revealed that they had a full infantry division on the island, but lacked anti-aircraft and coast artillery; and made it plain that they would resist any British attempt to land in Crete before Italy entered the war. When, later in October, Italy attacked, the Greek Government promptly said that it would welcome British troops in Crete, and one battalion—the 2/York and Lancaster—landed at Suda on 1st November; the headquarters of the 14th Brigade and an anti-aircraft regiment landed on the 6th, and a second battalion, the 2/Black Watch, on the 19th.

The Greek Government next proposed that Britain should take over full responsibility for Crete and enable them to send their 5th (Cretan) Division to Albania. Wavell was unwilling to accept this commitment and at length a compromise was reached: six Greek battalions would be withdrawn. With the agreement of the Australian Government, it was planned to replace these by sending the 17th Australian Brigade to Crete and to appoint an Australian commander of the combined force. Blamey decided that General Mackay should assume the new post and General Lavarack should temporarily command the remainder of the 6th Division until the arrival from England of General Wynter, who would take command of a re-formed 6th Division. Blamey hoped that, by the time the 9th Division was complete, Mackay and the 17th Brigade would have been withdrawn from Crete and the 6th Division reconstituted under Mackay's command, Wynter returning to the 9th.

In the meantime, however, Wavell, who had other plans for the 6th Australian Division, had flown to Crete to examine the situation and had decided that a small garrison was sufficient for Crete at present and larger forces would cause inconvenience and unnecessary commitment from both

[4] Maj-Gen M. D. Gambier-Parry, MC. GOC 2 Brit Armd Div 1941. Regular soldier; b. 21 Aug 1891.

military and naval points of view. The British commander on the island was ordered to base his plans for defending Crete on two or at the most three battalions and some additional anti-aircraft guns. It soon became evident that the Greek general staff proposed to take virtually all their troops and equipment from the island. Nevertheless, on the 23rd November, Wavell informed Blamey definitely that the 17th Brigade would not be needed for Crete. While these problems were being considered two events had notably decreased the immediate military anxieties caused by Italy's attack on Greece. One was the failure of the Italian advance itself, the other a successful attack on 11th November by aircraft from the carrier *Illustrious* on the Italian fleet at Taranto, which resulted in severe damage to three Italian battleships and two cruisers; by a single blow half the Italian battle squadron had been put out of action.

From the moment that the first British battalion landed in Crete and the eight aircraft touched down on a Greek airfield the British Commonwealth was maintaining fighting men on Greek soil. Thenceforward the question of support for Greece became more complicated: could the British Commonwealth send more men, or, if not, could it withdraw a contingent already deployed beside its only surviving ally?

On 4th November—the day before Churchill's speech—the Chiefs of Staff informed Wavell and his fellow commanders-in-chief that the British Government had decided to give Greece the greatest possible material and moral support at the earliest moment, and that, as it was impossible in their opinion for anything from the United Kingdom to arrive in time, the only course was to draw upon resources in Egypt and replace them from England. As a next step aerodromes were to be prepared for three Blenheim and two fighter squadrons, which should be accompanied by two batteries of anti-aircraft guns. On the 6th Air Commodore D'Albiac[5] who was appointed to command this contingent flew to Greece.

The force which embarked at Alexandria on 15th November in obedience to this decision consisted of 284 officers, 50 nursing sisters and 3,913 other ranks, with 579 vehicles and 130 motor-cycles. A little more than half of it belonged to the air force component, which included Nos. 80(F), 84(B) and 211(B) Squadrons and the balance of No. 30 Squadron; the remainder to the army. The military units included the two anti-aircraft batteries, the headquarters of a sub-base area, a number of engineer, signals and other detachments, and the 26th General Hospital. The staff of a small military mission was in the convoy.[6] Already there had been established in Athens a Greek Liaison Mission under Prince Peter, the King's brother.

The leaders of the force, the staff of this mission, and of an Inter-Services Mission under Rear-Admiral Turle[7] which had been set up on

[5] Air Marshal Sir John D'Albiac, KBE, CB, DSO. AOC RAF Palestine 1939, Greece 1940, Iraq 1941, Ceylon 1942, Tactical Air Force 1943-44; Dep Comd Medit Allied TAF 1944. Regular airman; of Aldeburgh, Eng; b. Kew, Eng, 28 Jan 1894.

[6] The mission was led by Maj-Gen T. G. Heywood who took over from Maj-Gen Gambier-Parry on 25 Nov.

[7] Rear-Adm C. E. Turle, CBE, DSO; RN. Naval attaché at Athens and Sofia. Of Dorset, Eng; b. 1883.

14th November, had a delicate task. They were part of a machine to establish cooperation with the Greeks. For example, the administrative officer of the main force had been instructed to choose a base area which would permit expansion to accommodate two divisions, and the possibility of expansion was soon being discussed with the Greeks; yet, early in November orders arrived from both London and Cairo that such discussions were forbidden. General Heywood's[8] instructions from the War Office on 11th November were explicit:

> You will not commit His Majesty's Government even by implication to the provision of any such requirements as may be referred to you by the Greek Government. Nor will you encourage any expectation of specific support without prior sanction in order that false hopes may not be raised.

On the 15th, however, Turle was given a more definite statement of policy from London—"to sustain Greek resistance by all means in our power but without committing in Greece forces which are vital to our security elsewhere."

Thus, at a time when General Wavell and Air Marshal Longmore had begun at last to receive reinforcements and were planning offensive action on two fronts in Africa, a new commitment was added, which, though its immediate demands were small, might at short notice require strong forces. Already, only a few days after the Italian invasion of Greece, Wavell's forces had moved forward against the large but isolated Italian army in Abyssinia. There were in November three weak British divisions—the 1st South African, and the 11th and 12th African—in East Africa, where a new commander, General Cunningham,[9] brother of the admiral, had taken charge. In the Sudan, the 5th Indian Division (Major-General Heath[1]) had arrived, and General Wavell had ordered General Platt to undertake "minor offensive operations". Thereupon, on the 6th November, an Indian battalion with a squadron of tanks recaptured the frontier post of Gallabat. This action was intended to continue until another post had been taken, but nearly all the tanks broke down on the rough ground or were damaged by enemy mines, and the Italians gained control of the air and subjected the forward troops to such heavy bombing that they were withdrawn from Gallabat.

Meanwhile substantial reinforcements were due to arrive in the Middle East during the early winter, and, though they would be too late to take part in the early stages of the planned offensives in East and North Africa, they yet lent weight to Wavell's planning. The principal additions in December and January were to be the 2nd Armoured Division from England, the remainder of two Australian divisions, and certain Australian

[8] Maj-Gen T. G. G. Heywood, CB, OBE. Leader Brit Military Mission, Greece 1940-41. B. 27 Dec 1886. Killed in aircraft accident 27 Aug 1943.

[9] Gen Sir Alan Cunningham, GCMG, KCB, DSO, MC. GOC East Africa Forces 1940-41, Eighth Army 1941. High Commnr and C-in-C for Palestine 1945-48. Regular soldier; b. 1 May 1887.

[1] Lt-Gen Sir Lewis Heath, KBE, CB, CIE, DSO, MC. GOC 5 Ind Div 1940-41; Comd III Ind Corps 1941-42. Regular soldier; b. Poona, India, 23 Nov 1885. Died 10 Jan 1954.

corps units; these would augment General Blamey's corps to three divisions.

In September Blamey had been informed of the decision of the War Cabinet that the fourth A.I.F. division, to be called the 9th, should be formed by using the troops in England as a nucleus, completing it with certain corps units then in Australia, and forming other units from reinforcements training there. It was hoped to send these additional troops in December. Blamey promptly pointed out that the units in England were highly efficient, and urged that the new units should be the best available in Australia and not formed from new recruits, and that he would now need more corps units. In effect he asked that units to complete the new division be drawn from the 8th, then training in Australia and that his corps units be left intact. This request was agreed to in that the 24th (outer States) Brigade of the 8th Division was transferred to Egypt; and it was arranged that the 18th Brigade, the 2/1st Machine Gun Battalion, 2/3rd Field Regiment and 2/1st Anti-Tank Regiment and certain engineer and army service units should sail for Egypt from England in the November convoy.

The 19th Brigade had now been incorporated in the 6th Division in place of the 18th. There were then eleven infantry brigades in the A.I.F.: in the Middle East the 16th, 17th and 19th; in England the 18th and 25th (which, as explained later, had been formed in England in June); in Australia the 20th, 21st, 22nd, 23rd, 24th and 26th, all formed between May and July. A twelfth brigade was needed to complete the infantry of four divisions, and, in October, the 27th was formed in Australia.

Meanwhile the October convoy from Australia was to bring about two-thirds of the 7th Division (10,918 men) including the 20th and 21st Brigades; the November convoy most of the units needed to complete the 6th and 7th.[2] The December convoy was to carry the remainder of the 7th in addition to some of the units needed to complete the 9th. Thus Blamey could hope that his corps, which for so long had included only one incomplete infantry division, would, in January or early February, possess three, complete in units and men if not in equipment.[3]

In addition No. 3 Squadron of the Royal Australian Air Force had arrived in the Middle East in August 1940 specifically to provide air cooperation with the Australian corps. General Blamey was now pressing for a second such squadron. Two officers of the 6th Division, Captain

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[2] On 14 Dec after the October convoy had reached Egypt the AIF was distributed thus:

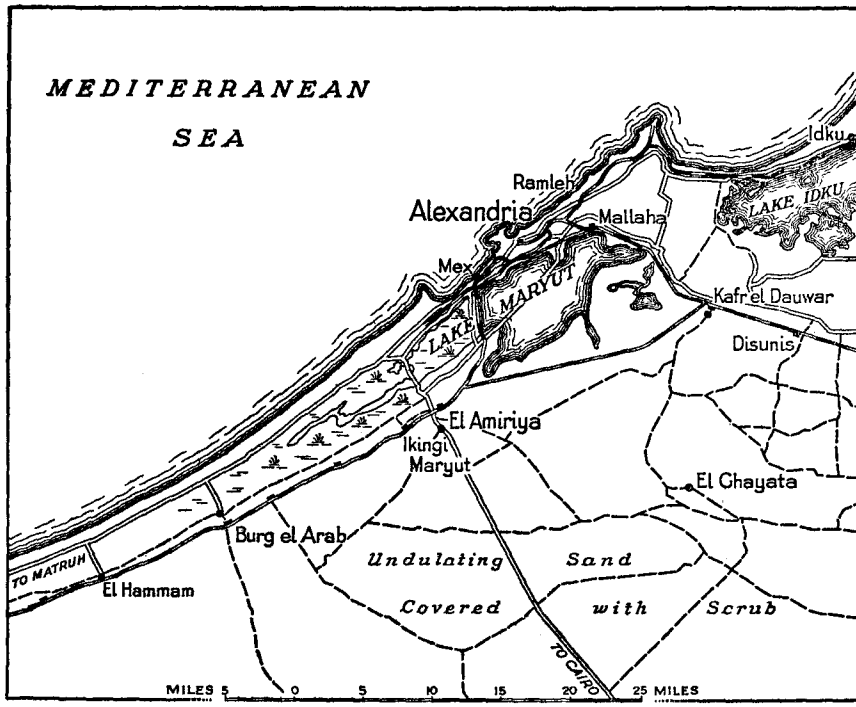
Overseas	50,143
In Australia	64,760
Awaiting enlistment after medical examination	2,599

A total of 11,819 had been discharged.

[3] Late in October units of 6 Div were brought up to strength and, in some instances, beyond it by the arrival of batches of reinforcements; however the division as a whole still lacked some units, notably of artillery. The discovery that a number of reinforcements had not fired a service rifle and a majority had no training whatever on the Bren gun brought to the fore the problem of training later bodies of reinforcements which might be expected to arrive from Australia no better qualified to join a trained unit. This, and the pressing need to free corps headquarters of such problems, led, in December, to the appointment of Colonel Wootten of the 2/2 Bn to command the Reinforcement Depot.

Whittaker[4] and Lieutenant Millard,[5] had attended a school of air liaison and then been attached to No. 3 Squadron which in November moved into the Western Desert.

In October, the 6th Division (still without the 19th Brigade) had been concentrated in the Amiriya area, west of Alexandria, where it took the



Polish brigade under command, and was made responsible for the defence of a position on the edge of the Western Desert, covering Lake Maryut and the Rosetta Nile—a last line of defence against a possible further Italian advance towards Alexandria. There, on the early morning of 16th October, the men watched their first raid on Alexandria, the searchlights groping the sky, anti-aircraft shells climbing and winking and Italian bombs flashing at ground level. There too they were introduced to the dust storms that sweep the Libyan desert—"dust such as we have never known before; you breathe, eat and sleep in dust", wrote one diarist.

How had these men felt about the events of the previous five months? The news that the German Army had invaded Holland and Belgium had been received with zest as bringing action nearer; and Italy's declaration

[4] Maj I. K. Whittaker, VX24; 17 Bde. Company secretary; of Hawthorn, Vic; b. Melbourne, 14 Aug 1910. Missing, presumed died 12 Sep 1941.

[5] Lt-Col A. B. Millard, MC, VX128. 6 Cav Regt 1939-41; CO 2/8 Armd Regt 1944. Public servant; of Hawthorn, Vic; b. Cottesloe, WA, 4 Jul 1910.

of war, according to more than one diarist, was welcomed on the grounds that Italy would be less useful to Germany as a belligerent than as a neutral, and that it would bring the Australians into the fight the sooner. After the fall of France one man wrote that "the troops have not the slightest doubt that our road is the road of victory, though the feeling is that the loss of France will immeasurably lengthen the struggle." News from Australia that the fall of France and the entry of Italy had caused a rush to the recruiting offices was a subject of caustic comment by men who felt that many Australians had considered them too precipitate when they volunteered seven months before, whereas they themselves were convinced that they had been more aware of realities and more spontaneous in their response. Those who enlisted in 1939 labelled those who enlisted in 1940 "deep thinkers".

A strong attraction of the transfer to Egypt had been that Cairo was but sixteen miles away from the well-equipped—but dusty—camp at Helwan, and, at the beginning, one-third of the men were given leave there until 1 a.m. each night. To a visitor Cairo combines many of the attractions of Paris with the colour and confusion of an Asiatic city. The investigation of the city's night life was "lots of fun—but at what a cost!" The move to Ikingi Maryut, Amiriya and Burg el Arab had the double advantage of bringing the division at least to the edge of the battlefield and yet leaving it within a short journey of the pleasures of Alexandria.

In Egypt as in Palestine the conduct of the men when on leave was reasonably orderly. An examination of the records of the military police in July and August, when some 20,000 troops were assembled in southern Palestine and leave to Tel Aviv and other towns was fairly frequent, shows that, on an average, four men absent without leave were arrested each day and that a "disturbance" or "an assault" (generally on café employees or civil policemen) occurred on about one day in four. When the transfer took place to Helwan the Australian military police at first worked in mixed parties with the British police, but, "much to the annoyance of the British deputy assistant provost marshal", Captain Hawker,[6] in charge of the provosts of the 6th Division, instructed his men to patrol independently, because the Australians were inclined to resent any but their own police speaking to them. Australians were now on leave in the same city as British and New Zealand troops, and Hawker reached the conclusion (as other observers did later) that there was a tendency to blame Australians for disturbances caused by New Zealanders. The men found the Egyptians less easy to get on with than the Palestinians, and the Egyptian police more aggressive; on the relatively rare days when several thousand men were on leave in Cairo or Alexandria, arrests generally numbered six to twelve a day, but "generally there were no arrests and no disturbances even when 500 were on leave."

Before the move to Egypt and in spite of a shortage of weapons so acute that for months the infantry units, in despair, had used wooden

[6] Maj G. C. Hawker, VX16 (served in British arty 1914-18). DAPM 6 Div 1939-41, LHQ 1942-44. Merchant; of Ivanhoe, Vic; b. Adelaide, 3 Sep 1894.

representations of the arms they lacked ("natures of weapons may be distinguished by different coloured paints or other means" a divisional instruction had said in July) the men had reached a high standard of training. In July Brigadier Allen considered that his brigade (which in June had done well in a four-day exercise with the 6th British Division—a regular formation) was "quite an efficient fighting force"; in August Brigadier Savige considered that the 17th "could give a good account of itself in action." At Helwan additional equipment was received and more realistic exercises made possible. There the 2/2nd Field Regiment—the 2/1st was still manning anti-aircraft guns in Palestine—shot the only live ammunition that was spared to it between leaving Australia and going into action, and the brigades exercised in the new "box" formation: fighting vehicles and anti-tank guns leading, guns on flanks and rear, and the infantry and "soft-skinned" vehicles inside the box.

The arrival of the 19th Brigade on 14th November made a full divisional exercise possible, and from the 21st to the 23rd the two older brigades made a mock attack on Burg el Arab, and the 19th, fresh from a series of severe exercises in Palestine, defended it. It was a good test of staff work and leadership; the men were keyed for actual battle and when opposing units clashed tempers ran hot and umpires were ignored. When it was over the diarist of the 16th Brigade recorded that "patrolling had not been aggressive enough", of the 17th that the brigade "could now undertake operations of any nature"; the 19th's diarist offered no general comment.

Nearly a year had passed since the division had been formed, and it had reached so high a state of training and confidence as to cause some of its experienced leaders (whose standard of comparison was the then-unsurpassed Australian Corps in France in 1918) to declare that it was the best division they had known.[7] The men in the ranks shared these good opinions. At this time an infantry sergeant—a country man with a cautious turn of phrase—wrote in a letter: "This brigade (16th) is now composed of soldiers. We didn't realise it until we saw the reinforcements behaving badly on leave and looking anyhow. If all our months of training and waiting have done that much it is something. In my ignorance I think that as a brigade it will take a lot of beating. The New Zealanders look a likely crew and I would not underrate the Poles. The Tommies have not the physique of these men. All things considered I would be most surprised if we can't put up a good show—given of course the opportunity, the support and the equipment."

[7] J. E. Edmonds and R. Maxwell-Hyslop, *History of the Great War: Military Operations France and Belgium*, Vol. V (1948) pp. 178-9: "The Australians . . . in the action of Hamel, 4th July, . . . had shown how to conduct a large offensive operation . . . . Always formidable adversaries, they had continually improved in their methods, and in 1918 had been invariably successful. The staff work of the corps and its divisions was incontestably of the highest class, and the tasks set to troops were not only carried out by all ranks with innate military skill, tempered by training and experience, with reasoned audacity and peerless courage, but also with marked individual initiative and independence and the certainty that, whatever the odds, no enemy could resist them. Of their methods there are no better examples than Mont St Quentin, and Montbréhain, where a few hundred Australians drove the infantry of two, even three German divisions from their entrenched positions."

Nearly all the officers and sergeants had now attended one or more schools in the Middle East; units and brigades had exercised side by side with British regulars and considered that they now had little more to learn from them. There had been some weeding out of less competent officers and, in each unit, some officers had been promoted from the fine material in the ranks. Leaders and men considered themselves ready for action. What was their picture of the battles that lay ahead?

The previous war had ended with a short period of open warfare after three years during which huge armies had faced each other in continuous trench lines and under conditions resembling those of a siege. Since then soldiers had been developing weapons and tactics which would restore to land warfare its former mobility, and overcome the kind of deadlock that occurred on the old Western Front. In the opinion of the more imaginative among the younger soldiers in all countries this was partly to be achieved by using tanks on a large scale. In 1918 Britain had been forming three armoured divisions ("groups" they were called at the time) each of twelve battalions of tanks to take part in the expected final offensive of 1919—a large tank army even by the standards of 1940. However, for more than ten years after the end of the war, over-conservative army leaders and the desire of governments to limit expenditure had combined to hamper experiment and reform, and it was not until 1927 that even a mechanised brigade was established in the post-war British Army, and not until 1938 that it was decided to form an armoured division, though in the interval a number of enthusiastic British officers and designers had been working hard on problems of tank design and tactics. By 1938 both the Russian Army and the German Army, whose leaders had seen little virtue in the tank in 1918, had built up substantial tank forces and developed new doctrines of armoured warfare.

In 1936 the British War Office had decided to concentrate on two types of tanks—one the relatively fast "cruiser", whose armour would resist the bullets of anti-tank rifles and heavy machine-guns, and the second the infantry tank, with armour able to resist either the 37-mm or 2-pounder anti-tank guns, then the most powerful in existence (though the British Army had already designed a 6-pounder gun and the German a 50-mm firing a 4½-pound shell).

Side by side with the development of theories of armoured warfare had been evolved tactical doctrines for all arms that created a picture of operations differing radically from those of 1918. It was expected that before two opposing armies clashed there would be a struggle between the air forces for control of the air; such forces as could be spared from this preliminary air battle might be employed bombing the communications of the opposing army or in low-flying attacks on its columns (a form of attack which British military thinkers then considered would be very costly to the attacker if the troops on the ground were disciplined and well armed). The armies' advance would be led by a screen of armoured car regiments supported perhaps by light tanks and motorised infantry, whose

role would be chiefly to find the enemy, not to strike him. The main bodies would consist of infantry—"the most adaptable and the most generally useful of all arms," said *Field Service Regulations,* Volume 2, 1935, "since it is capable of operating over almost any ground either by day or by night and can find or make cover for itself more readily than any other arms." With the object of increasing the speed at which infantry could move and reducing the deadly fatigue which the infantryman in battle habitually suffers, the British infantry battalion had been provided with enough motor vehicles to carry its heavy weapons, reserve ammunition and other supplies, and some of its men. To fully motorise all the infantry (as was done for infantry units incorporated in armoured divisions and was planned for a limited number of "motorised" divisions) would clutter the roads with unmanageable columns of vehicles; and in any event infantry would be required to fight in country in which vehicles could not move.[8]

The infantryman's basic weapon was the rifle, but each section had also a machine-gun light enough to be carried and operated, if need be, by one man. Each platoon possessed also an anti-tank rifle—the heaviest anti-tank weapon one man could operate—and a small mortar firing a 2-pound bomb. In its headquarters company the infantry battalion possessed some supporting weapons—two 3-inch mortars firing a 10-pound bomb, and ten bullet-proof, tracked carriers, whose principal roles were to reconnoitre and to move the crews and their light machine-guns or anti-tank rifles across bullet-swept areas to a position where they could usefully be fired from the ground; though the weapons could also be fired from the carrier, which thus was, in effect, a very light tank.

It was considered that infantry would be able successfully to attack a well-equipped and well-prepared enemy only by taking advantage of the ground or under cover of darkness or smoke. Against strong defences they would need the support of artillery to bombard the enemy's positions, perhaps to provide a moving barrage just ahead of their advance, and to counter the enemy's guns; and of infantry tanks, heavily armoured enough to resist the enemy's anti-tank guns—and therefore slow in movement. These tanks, advancing with the infantry, were to break through the enemy's wire, overcome machine-gun posts and generally increase the impetus of the advance.

In the attack, which would probably be undertaken in the half light, at dawn or dusk, the infantry would advance widely dispersed, with perhaps five yards between men, 100 yards between sections (of eight or ten men) and 200 between platoons. The defending infantry would normally occupy not the continuous trench lines of 1918, but groups of two-man weapon pits, perhaps connected by shallow crawl trenches, and sited so that each platoon or company occcupied not a "line" but a "locality" and could defend itself against attack from any likely direction. Such posts would be sited in depth so that, if the attacker overcame the

[8] The use of cycles for adding mobility for small parties was emphasised in pre-war manuals.

forward posts, there would be more behind. The weapon pits gave protection not only against artillery and machine-gun fire from the ground or air, but against tanks. It was emphasised that dispersion both in attack and defence would require a high standard of intelligence and initiative in junior leaders.

The principal weapon of the artillery was to be the 25-pounder which could be used either as gun or, by varying the charge, as a howitzer. It was organised in regiments of two twelve-gun batteries. Medium artillery regiments for targets demanding a heavier shell and for countering hostile artillery, were to be equipped with 6-inch and 8-inch howitzers (the latter firing a 200-pound shell) and 5 and 6-inch guns.

The principle was laid down that, if the attack was held, "men held up should not be reinforced with additional men; either the attack should be pressed at other points where progress is still possible, or additional fire power should be provided."[1] If the infantry-artillery-heavy tank attack broke the enemy's main line of resistance the mobile armoured divisions—cruiser and light tanks and motorised infantry and artillery—would attempt to exploit the success and carry out the pursuit. Despite Britain's poverty of armoured forces the theory was that the climax of the battle between well-equipped armies would be a fierce encounter between the opposing armoured divisions; once the enemy's armour had been defeated the battle would be won, and the final phase—pursuit by tanks and aircraft—would open.

In the campaign in France in 1940 the effectiveness of the new British weapons had been proved; though there were not enough of them. The 2-pounder anti-tank gun had pierced the armour of the heaviest German tanks, provided the crew held its fire until the target was about 300 yards away; the infantry tanks had been proof against the German 37-mm gun and, individually, the best heavy tanks in the field.[2] However, the Germans were beginning to produce a heavier gun, and a gun-versus-armour race was foreseen in which the Germans, already well-equipped with relatively light tanks and guns, were likely to hold the lead, perhaps for some years.

It was not unnatural that after the defeat in France there should have been bitter criticism of British equipment and tactical doctrines. But, in fact, the German tactics had not greatly differed from those on which the British Army was being trained; and on both sides the campaigns of 1940 and 1941 were fought substantially with weapons and tactics adopted some years before the war. Weapon for weapon the British equipment was superior to the German (it was partly British caution in not putting new weapons into production until they had been exhaustively tested, and partly economy that caused her shortages in 1940). The success of the German

[1] *Field Service Regulations*, Vol. II, Operations-General, 1935, p. 125. (General Wavell had written the first draft of this basic manual.) "It is doubtful if there exists in the records of the AIF one instance in which, after one attacking party had been signally defeated, a second, sent after it, succeeded without some radical change having been effected in the plan or the conditions." (Bean, *Official History of Australia in the War of 1914-18*, Vol. II (1924), p. 631.)

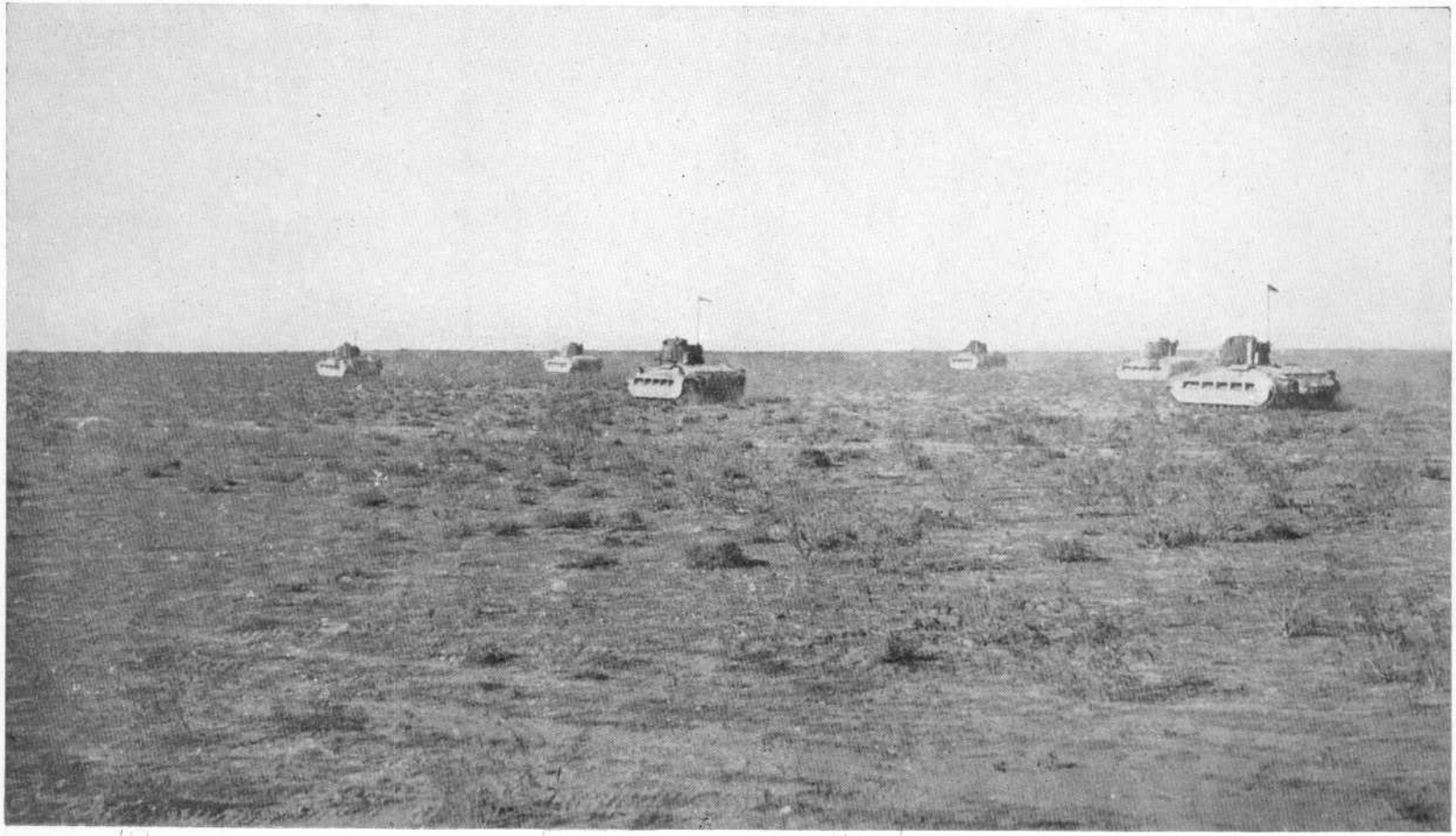
[2] There were two battalions of heavy tanks in France in May 1940, and because of breakdowns these had a total of only sixteen tanks available at Arras on the 21st of that month when their greatest test came. The partly-equipped 1st Armoured Division went to France later in May, and after taking part in the fighting on the Somme, was embarked at Cherbourg and Brest in June.

policy of concentrating armoured forces to exploit the break-through, and the failure of the French policy of dispersing their armour, confirmed British leaders in the doctrine that the main armoured forces should be kept together, should consist of relatively fast vehicles and should be used to exploit success and pursue a defeated enemy, while separate formations of heavy, relatively slow tanks were used to cooperate with infantry. The organisation of the British armoured division was, however, altered somewhat on German lines, the principal change being that an infantry battalion was added to each armoured brigade and the anti-tank and anti-aircraft artillery strengthened. And although Britain had to build anew her tank forces, the experiences in France persuaded her leaders to aim at far more armoured divisions than had been planned in 1939. Then the theory was accepted that Britain could maintain only three or four such divisions in the field, but by December 1940, in addition to the 7th Armoured Division in the Middle East, and the 2nd which was preparing to go there from England, there were in England, in various stages of preparation, four more armoured divisions—1st, 6th, 8th and 9th; and another (the 11th) was to be formed early in 1941—seven in all, not including three brigades of heavy tanks.

Three devices employed by the Germans impressed British leaders, namely the landing of paratroops behind the defenders' lines, the use of a Fifth Column (a term and practice used in the Spanish Civil War of 1936-39); and the scale on which the Germans used low-flying aircraft in close support of infantry.[3] This led to intensification of training against air attack.

In the Australian force the special experience of its leaders as young infantry officers in the Australian Corps of 1918, or in the light horse in Palestine, had caused them to emphasise certain points in the British doctrines. The A.I.F. of 1918 had been rich in enterprising young officers promoted from the ranks; and throughout the training of the 6th Division emphasis had been placed on the need for encouraging initiative in N.C.O's and platoon leaders—a relatively easy task in an army in whose ranks were many potential officers. And, in 1918, the Australians had developed aggressive patrolling to a degree that had bewildered their enemy and astonished senior British commanders. It was a result of this earlier experience that the men of the new A.I.F. were given exacting training in patrolling, particularly at night, and were to go into battle convinced that, in all circumstances, they and not the enemy were to be masters of no-man's land.

[3] A minor lesson learnt from the Germans was the value of the Tommy gun, a weapon which the War Office had been singularly slow to adopt, but which was made part of the standard equipment of the infantryman after the fall of France. In 1918 German detachments had been equipped with pistols fitted with drums holding 35 cartridges (see *Official History of Australia in the War of 1914-18*, Vol. VI, p. 1019), and, in 1939, the German Army was fully equipped with more modern weapons of the same type. Their value was proved against British troops in Norway, and in the skirmishing in Lorraine that preceded the German offensive of May 1940, but the British Army had so few that, in May, a battalion in the field was fortunate if it held even two or three. In June, 1940, when commandos were being formed, there were, according to Brigadier Dudley Clarke, in *Seven Assignments* (1948), only forty Tommy guns in England.



'I' tanks advancing across the desert, 19th December 1940.

(Imperial War Museum photo)



(Australian War Memorial photo)

Unloading a cargo of benzine at the Salum jetty, 27th December 1940. Most of the men handling the cargo are members of a Cypriot labour battalion.

CHAPTER 6

VICTORY AT SIDI BARRANI

THE stage was now set for the opening of the desert battle which General Wavell and his subordinates had discussed before the Italian invasion of Greece. Thus far the new theatre of war had made relatively small demands on Wavell's and Longmore's forces, and the Italian Army's failure to overcome the Greeks lowered an already low estimate of its efficiency. Although Western Desert Force was still greatly outnumbered by General Bergonzoli's army, it had received useful reinforcements. It will be recalled that in October two tank regiments from England had joined the 7th Armoured Division, bringing its two armoured brigades each to their proper strength of three regiments; and the 7th Royal Tank Regiment had arrived, equipped with heavy "Matilda" tanks to be used with infantry to break into strong defensive positions. In September the 4th Indian Division had been completed by adding to it the 16th British Brigade; in November its own third brigade arrived. In the Matruh Fortress was assembled a force equal to two infantry brigades. The 4th New Zealand Brigade, had, since September, been in reserve either at Daba or Bagush; and on the edge of the Delta were the 6th Australian Division, now more or less complete, and the Polish brigade. Thus in three months the forces west of Alexandria had increased from two weak divisions to three at full strength or close to it, plus four infantry brigades; and within a few weeks the New Zealand and the 7th Australian Divisions would be complete, in units if not equipment, and the 2nd Armoured Division would have arrived.

In the desert throughout October and November mobile columns of the Support Group of the armoured division had continued to harass the enemy, who showed little disposition to press farther forward. There were few heavy clashes, the largest in this period being on 19th November when some 100 enemy troops were killed, eleven captured and five enemy tanks destroyed for a loss of three killed and two wounded.

Meanwhile the tactics to be employed in the coming battle had been set out in a memorandum issued by General Wilson: a rapid advance, a break-in by heavy tanks supported by carriers, a mopping-up by infantry who would be carried in vehicles as close as possible to the point of entry. On 4th November the brigade commanders had been informed that the attack would open on the 14th, but on the 12th it was decided that, because the building up of supply dumps was proceeding too slowly, and because of the loss of troops and aircraft to Crete, the attack would be postponed until the second week in December, when the moon would again favour a night attack. A realistic training exercise was carried out in the desert on 25th and 26th November. Elaborate steps were taken to ensure secrecy and surprise and it was not until 2nd December that brigade staffs and unit commanders were told the full reason for the

preparations that were being made around them. Planning was complicated by the fact that, while it was in progress, Wavell informed the field commanders that the 4th Indian Division was to move to the Abyssinian front soon after the attack, being relieved in the Western Desert by the 6th Australian Division.

Moreover, on 28th November, Wavell had sent Wilson an instruction enlarging the possible scope of the coming battle, the aim of which, it will be recalled, had been to cut up the Italian force and then withdraw on to Mersa Matruh again:

> I know that you have in mind and are planning the fullest possible exploitation of any initial success of Compass operation (he wrote) . . . The difficulties, administrative and tactical, of a deep advance are fully realised. It is, however, possible that an opportunity may offer for converting the enemy's defeat into an outstanding victory. It is believed that a large proportion of the enemy's total strength in tanks and artillery is in the forward area, so that if a success in this area is achieved the enemy reserves in the rear area will have comparatively little support . . . I am not entertaining extravagant hopes of this operation, but I do wish to make certain that if a big opportunity occurs we are prepared morally, mentally and administratively to use it to the fullest.

The problem that faced General O'Connor was, with a force numerically inferior but more spirited and expert and probably stronger in tanks,[1] to defeat an enemy deployed in an arc of circular camps consisting of stone sangars and with an anti-tank obstacle round them. The Italians had a two-to-one superiority in artillery, but their camps were distributed across fifty miles of desert from the sea to the escarpment, and there were wide gaps between them. O'Connor believed that this arc was manned by one Italian and two Libyan divisions and that, between it and Bardia inclusive, there were four Italian divisions, arranged in depth. It was believed that these divisions were deployed thus:

Sofafi and Rabia, 7,000 troops of the *63rd (Cyrene) Division,* 72 medium and 30 light tanks.

Nibeiwa, *Maletti Group* (2,500 Libyans and 12 field guns).

Tummar and Point 90, *2nd Libyan Division* (including 1,000 Italians).

Maktila and Sidi Barrani, *1st Libyan Division* (including 1,500 Italians).

Coastal area west of Sidi Barrani, *1st (25th March) Division.*

Azzaziya, 72 medium and 30 light tanks.

Buq Buq-Capuzzo, *2nd (28th October) Division.*

Escarpment Sofafi to Halfaya, remainder of *63rd Division.*

Bardia, probably *3rd (21st April)* and *62nd (Marmarica) Divisions.*

On 4th December a final conference at General Wavell's headquarters was held, and on 6th December General O'Connor issued his orders. His

[1] The Italian armoured units were equipped either with light, thinly-armoured tanks armed with one or two machine-guns or with a medium tank, the M11, of eleven tons armed with one 37-mm gun in a fixed casemate and two machine-guns, and so thinly armoured on the sides that the anti-tank rifle carried by British infantry could pierce it. In 1940 the M13, a greatly improved vehicle of thirteen tons, was being issued. It carried one 47-mm gun and one machine-gun twin-mounted in a revolving turret and two machine-guns in the hull.

intention was, firstly, to destroy or capture enemy forces in the Nibeiwa-Tummar area, and to advance northwards through the gap towards Sidi Barrani, thus isolating Maktila; secondly, if the situation was favourable, to raid the enemy's communications and dumps in the Buq Buq area; and, thirdly, to exploit towards Buq Buq and Sofafi. The task of the Matruh Force (Brigadier Selby) was to ensure that the garrison of Maktila camp did not move to the assistance of the Tummar camps. Accordingly the first objective of Major-General Beresford-Peirse's[2] 4th Indian Division (to which the 16th British Brigade and 7th Royal Tank were attached) was Nibeiwa camp, whence they would advance to Tummar West, Tummar East and Point 90 camps and be prepared to advance northwards to cut off Maktila. The 7th Armoured Division would with its armour protect the deployment of the 4th Indian, and with its Support Group protect the left flank of that division; it would ensure that the enemy did not deliver a counter-attack from the Sofafi area; and, if the attacks succeeded, it would advance through the twenty-mile gap between Sofafi and Nibeiwa towards Buq Buq. Finally it would cover the withdrawal of the Indian division to Mersa Matruh—for it was still part of the plan to withdraw this main part of the force after the battle had been won. Naval ships were to shell the Maktila positions on the night before the attack; air support was to be given by No. 202 Group (Air Commodore Collishaw[3]) which included three squadrons and one flight of fighters, three squadrons and two flights of day bombers and three squadrons of night bombers. Two army cooperation squadrons (including No. 3, R.A.A.F.) were directly under O'Connor's command.

So wide an area separated the two forces—the bulk of the armoured division was along the Matruh-Siwa road, some sixty miles from the enemy's line—that O'Connor decided to move forward the attacking troops to positions about thirty miles from the enemy on the 7th-8th, to make a further advance on the 8th-9th, and attack in the early morning of the 9th. The first move was accomplished smoothly, and during the 8th the force was deployed motionless in the desert, half expecting discovery and air attack which did not come.

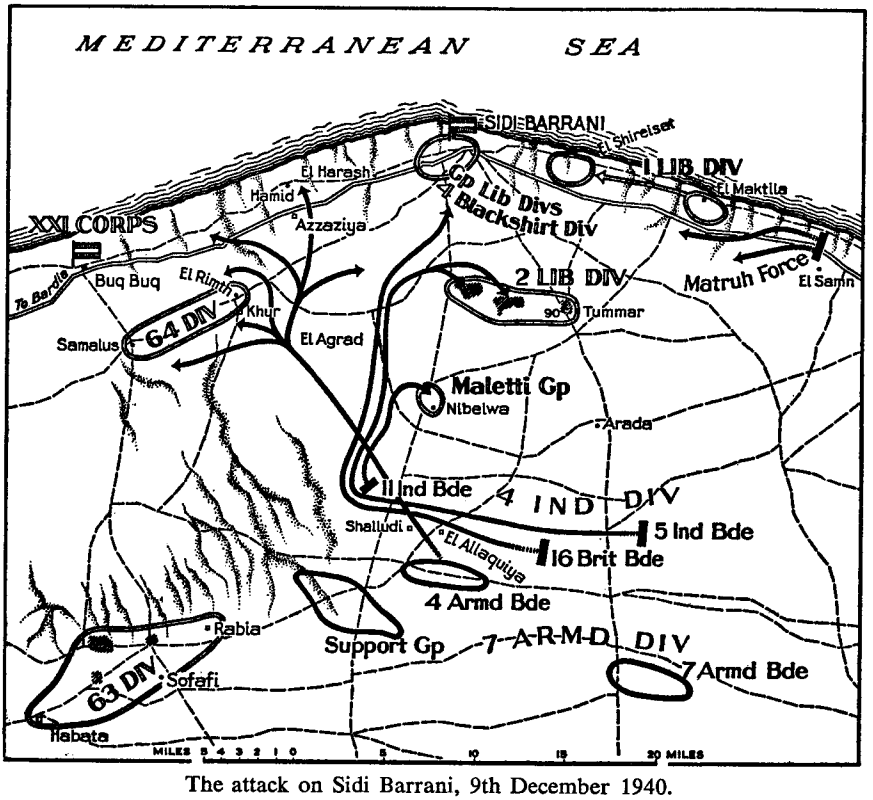
On the bitterly cold night of the 8th, in the moonlight, the 7th Royal Tank and the 1/6th Rajputana Rifles (of the 11th Indian Brigade) moved forward to a rendezvous five miles south of Nibeiwa, the sound of their vehicles being drowned by aircraft flying low overhead. At 4.45 a.m. on the 9th a second Indian battalion, the 4/7th Rajput Regiment, opened fire on Nibeiwa camp from the east, to distract the enemy's attention. During the morning a second battalion—the 2/Camerons—joined the tank regiment. At 7.15 a.m. the artillery of the Indian division opened fire and the tanks, which had moved north to a point about four miles west of the camp, wheeled and advanced on its north-west corner where

[2] Lt-Gen Sir Noel Beresford-Peirse, KBE, CB, DSO. GOC 4 Ind Div 1940-41, Western Desert Force 1941; GOC Brit Tps in Sudan and Comdt Sudan Def Force 1941-42. Regular soldier; of Bedale, Yorks, Eng; b. Londonderry, Nth Ireland, 22 Dec 1887.

[3] AVM R. Collishaw, CB, DSO, OBE, DSC, DFC. AOC Egypt Gp RAF 1939; Comd 202 Gp RAF 1940. Regular airman; of London; b. Canada, 22 Nov 1893.

there was a gap in the minefield. As they neared it they came upon about twenty Italian medium tanks warming their engines outside the perimeter. These they disabled, and at 7.35 a.m. the attacking tanks lumbered into the camp and ranged about it silencing batteries and infantry posts.

Frightened, dazed or desperate Italians erupted from tents and slit trenches, some to surrender supinely, others to leap gallantly into battle, hurling grenades or blazing machine-guns in futile belabour of the impregnable intruders. Italian artillerymen gallantly swung their pieces on to the advancing monsters. They fought until return fire from the British tanks stretched them dead or wounded around their limbers. General Maletti, the Italian commander, sprang from his dugout, machine-gun in hand. He fell dead from an answering burst; his son beside him was struck down and captured.[4]



The attack on Sidi Barrani, 9th December 1940.

At 7.45 Brigadier Savory[5] ordered the Camerons to follow through the gap. They moved in trucks to within 500 yards and then advanced on foot, being followed at 8 a.m. by the Rajputana Rifles. Half an hour later the camp had virtually been taken, though isolated posts held out until

[4] G. R. Stevens, *Fourth Indian Division*, p. 18.

[5] Lt-Gen Sir Reginald Savory, KCIE, CB, DSO, MC. Comd 11 Ind Bde 1940-41; GOC Eritrea, 1941, 23 Ind Div 1942-43, Persia and Iraq 1945-46. Regular soldier; of East Anstey, Eng; b. London, 26 Jul 1894.

10.40. Two thousand prisoners and thirty-five medium tanks were captured; the attackers lost only fifty-six officers and men, but six of the twenty-eight Matilda tanks that went into the attack were disabled on a minefield when leaving the camp after its capture. Italian officers said that they had no inkling that an assault was coming until about 5 a.m. when they heard the tank engines humming to the west of them.

Meanwhile the 5th Indian Brigade (Brigadier Lloyd[6]) had followed the 11th through the gap south of Nibeiwa. There it turned north to a point west of the Tummar camps, where it arrived at midday and awaited the arrival, soon after, of the 7th Royal Tanks which were to lead the Indian brigade into Tummar as they had led the Camerons into Nibeiwa. The supporting artillery opened fire at 1.30 and, the tanks, now reduced to twenty-two, advanced in a dense dust storm against the north-west corner of Tummar West. The Italians fought well, particularly the gunners, but again were quickly overcome. Twenty minutes after the tanks the 1/Royal Fusiliers were driven forward in the lorries of the 4th New Zealand Reserve Motor Transport Company, whose drivers abandoned their vehicles and charged forward with the Fusiliers. They were followed by the 3/1st Punjab. At 4.20 the third battalion of the brigade—4/6th Rajputana Rifles—attacked Tummar East, but before they reached it they encountered a strong enemy column advancing thence to counter-attack towards Tummar West. There was sharp fighting in the course of which the Rajputana killed about 200 and captured 1,000 Italians and, at dusk, the battalion went into leaguer 500 yards north-east of Tummar West. Next morning they occupied Tummar East without meeting resistance. In the two Tummar camps 3,500 to 4,000 men had been captured.

Having broken through the semicircle of camps at Nibeiwa and Tummar General O'Connor decided that the Indian division should move north during the night and attack the Sidi Barrani area next day. The 16th Brigade, which had come forward to a position just west of Nibeiwa, the 11th Indian Brigade, the 7th Royal Tank (now with only eight of its original fifty-seven tanks in working order) and the artillery of the Indian division were ordered forward. The plan was that the 11th Indian Brigade, moving up behind the 16th, should prevent the enemy from escaping southwards, and the 16th and the tanks should cut the main road leading west.

One task of the 7th Armoured Division[7] had been to protect the assaulting formations from interference by the strong enemy reserves in the Buq Buq-Sidi Barrani area and in the Sofafi-Rabia Camps. These were believed to include the *Tank Group,* the *63rd* and a Blackshirt division (supposed to be the *1st,* actually the *4th*). The plan was that the 4th Armoured Brigade should destroy the *Tank Group* at Azzaziya and engage the enemy's infantry reserves, while the 7th Brigade was held

[6] Maj-Gen W. L. Lloyd, CBE, DSO, MC. Comd 5 Ind Bde 1940-41; Dir of Mil Tng GHQ India 1941-42; GOC 10 Ind Div 1942-44. Regular soldier; b. 1 Mar 1896. Died 22 Jan 1944.

[7] Brig J. A. L. Caunter temporarily commanded the division during the battle, Maj-Gen M. O'M. Creagh being ill.

in reserve; the Support Group was to engage the attention of the Sofafi-Rabia camps.

At 6.10 a.m. on the 9th the 4th Brigade advanced north-west from the Bir el Allaquiya area, passed to the south and west of Nibeiwa, fanned out and cut the road between Sidi Barrani and Buq Buq. At Azzaziya where 400 Italians surrendered to the 11th Hussars no tanks were found. The headquarters of the brigade were established at El Agrad.

Meanwhile Brigadier Selby had brought forward his detachment from Matruh Force. He had vehicles enough to transport only part of the Matruh garrison—1,773 troops. They moved in three columns: one, which he himself commanded, included the 3/Coldstream Guards, six field guns, three light tanks and a company of machine-gunners; the second included a rifle and machine-gun company, one field gun and eight dummy guns; the third, detachments of infantry and artillery and sixty-five dummy tanks. On the night of the 8th-9th the third column established a "brigade" of dummy tanks, to mislead the enemy into the belief that strong forces were concentrating in the north and rejoined the other columns, which had advanced during the night to a line running north-east to south-west through El Samn. Thence the columns advanced and by 11 a.m. had reached a wadi four miles east of Maktila. At 3.22 p.m. on the 9th Brigadier Selby learning that Nibeiwa had fallen and the 7th Armoured Division was nearing Buq Buq, ordered his little force to cut the road leading west of Maktila. There was little daylight left and it was not until the following morning that the Coldstream reached the main road, and by 10 o'clock it was evident that the Maktila garrison had withdrawn during the night. The Coldstream, with a tank troop allotted to Matruh Force, set off in pursuit.

On the morning of the 10th the 4th Armoured Brigade was lying like an arrowhead between Sidi Barrani and Buq Buq, facing on the west a series of Italian camps and strong points from El Rimth to Samalus and south of it; astride the road near Hamid (there the point of the arrow lay); and facing Sidi Barrani to the east. The 7th Hussars attacked the enemy's posts round El Rimth but they were too strong to take without costly losses and by early afternoon the main strength of the brigade had been sent eastwards against the *4th Blackshirt* and *1st Libyan Divisions,* the 6th Royal Tanks joining Matruh Force (and eventually coming under the command of the 4th Indian Division) and the 2nd Royal Tanks attacking, also with the Indian division, astride the main road towards Sidi Barrani.

Although the Indian brigade and the tanks had not then arrived, the 16th Brigade had attacked towards Sidi Barrani alone at dawn on the 10th. Advancing over open country in a dense dust storm it was met by effective artillery fire and was held. However, during the morning, the 11th Brigade with the artillery of the 4th Indian Division and the tanks arrived and the advance continued. Finally a concerted attack late in the afternoon broke the enemy's resistance, and by 4.40 Sidi Barrani had fallen.

That morning the Coldstream, advancing from Maktila had come under fire at El Shireisat, just east of Sidi Barrani. There they were joined at 4 p.m. by the 6th Royal Tanks and, in the failing light, an attack was launched on what appeared to be a small perimeter camp. The advancing tanks came under sharp artillery fire and some were hit but not abandoned; at 5.40 they withdrew. Learning from a captured Italian officer that the entire *1st Libyan Division,* which had left Maktila on the night of the 9th, was in the camp, and that the men were in low spirits, Selby ordered the 6th Royal Tanks, now with only seven cruiser and six light tanks in action, to attack again, though without artillery or infantry support. This attack also ran into effective fire from anti-tank guns and the tanks eventually withdrew.

Thus, by nightfall on the 10th December, Sidi Barrani had been captured, though east of it the *1st Libyan Division* was still an effective force and had repulsed the attacks of Selby's men. The only enemy camp north of Sofafi still untaken was that at Point 90. On its left flank the 4th Armoured Brigade faced strong enemy forces in the Khur-Samalus camps. Farther south the Support Group had exchanged fire with the enemy outposts in the Sofafi-Rabia area and one tank regiment of the 7th Armoured Brigade (8th Hussars) had advanced to Bir Habata on the southern edge of the Sofafi-Rabia camps, but had been ordered, before it had achieved any results, to return to its brigade, still in reserve.

On the night of the 10th-11th the 11th Indian Brigade took up a north-south position south-east of Sidi Barrani with the 16th Brigade continuing the line to the coast, thus cutting off the enemy withdrawing from Maktila. The Central India Horse (the mechanised cavalry regiment of the 4th Indian Division) hemmed in the retreating enemy from the south. The Matruh Force was still to the east of this remaining enemy pocket. Late on the 10th Caunter[8] had ordered that next morning his 7th Brigade should relieve his 4th, attack the Samalus-El Rimth positions and advance west, while the 4th moved south to the Bir Shalludi area, then west to beyond Sofafi to stop the enemy withdrawing from that area.

Next morning (the 11th) attacks were delivered by Matruh Force, the 11th Indian Brigade group and tanks, and during the day one group after another of the *1st Libyan* and *4th Blackshirt Divisions* surrendered; at 1 p.m. contact was established between Matruh Force and the 4th Indian Division. Meanwhile the 1,500 to 2,000 men in Point 90 camp had surrendered on the approach of the 3/1st Punjab and five infantry tanks, which had been under repair at Tummar West.

While these isolated survivors of the leading enemy corps—the group of Libyan divisions—were being overcome, it was discovered that, during the night the enemy had withdrawn from the Khur-Samalus and the Sofafi-Rabia camps. Early in the morning patrols crossed the main road east and west of Buq Buq on a wide front. Later the 7th Armoured Brigade took up the pursuit. A squadron of the 3rd Hussars, following the

[8] Brig J. A. L. Caunter, CBE, MC. Comd 4 Armd Bde 1940-41; BGS GHQ India 1941-43. Regular soldier; b. Banwell, Somerset, Eng, 17 Dec 1889.

retreating enemy along a track four miles west of Buq Buq came under heavy fire, bogged in a salt pan, and ten of its tanks were knocked out before another squadron overran the guns. However, the 3rd, 8th and 11th Hussars continued the pursuit and by nightfall had taken 14,000 prisoners—including many from the *64th (Catanzaro) Division* whose presence at Samalus and Khur had not been known to the attackers—and sixty-eight guns, for a loss of thirty-six officers and men and eighteen tanks. It seems probable that the *2nd Blackshirt Division* was broken in this pursuit.

However, although part of the *2nd Blackshirt* and of the *64th Division* failed to escape, the *63rd* from Sofafi and Rabia succeeded in doing so. The orders to the 4th Armoured Brigade to change places with the 7th, issued at 11 p.m. on the 10th, did not reach it until the following day. At 6.30 that morning a patrol of the Support Group had found that Rabia camp had been abandoned. An infantry company reached Sofafi at 1.10 p.m. and found that it too was empty. Not until nightfall on the 11th was the 4th Armoured Brigade in the Shalludi area organising for a pursuit. The leading troops of the Support Group were then in contact with the retreating enemy. The 7th Armoured Brigade was beyond Buq Buq collecting prisoners.

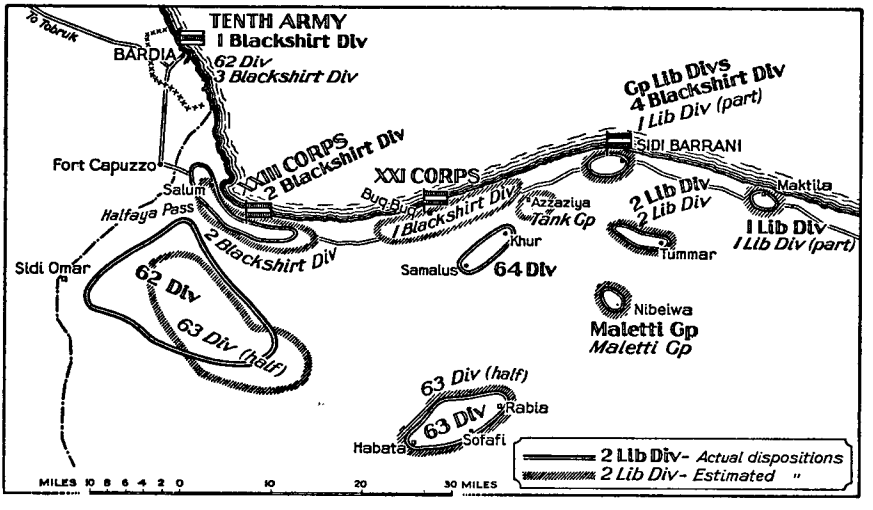
The battle was over. Although the enemy division on the inland flank had been allowed to escape, the victory had been decisive and spectacular. Along the fifty-miles-wide battlefield and astride the road leading west lay a fantastic litter of abandoned trucks, guns and tanks, piles of abandoned arms and ammunition, of food stores and clothing, and of the paper which a modern army spends so profusely. It was some days before all the enemy dead had been found and buried. Long columns of dejected prisoners in drab olive-green and khaki streamed eastwards. In the whole battle 38,300 prisoners, 237 guns and 73 tanks were captured. Four generals were taken: Gallina of the *Group of Libyan Divisions,* Chario of the *1st Libyan Division,* Piscatori of the *2nd Libyan,* Merzari of the *4th Blackshirt.* The 4th Indian Division, on whom nearly all the casualties had fallen, lost 41 officers and 394 men, of whom 17 officers and 260 men were lost in the 16th Brigade which had made the unsupported attack at Sidi Barrani.

We know now that in December Graziani's *Tenth Army* in Cyrenaica consisted of eleven divisions.[9] He had hoped to launch an offensive between 15th and 18th December, but was forestalled. The Italian force in the Maktila-Sofafi-Buq Buq triangle had been considerably stronger in infantry than the British Intelligence staffs realised;[1] instead of one Italian division and a half, two Libyan divisions and a strong tank group, there were three Italian divisions and two Libyan—but no concentrated tank group. The *4th* (not the *1st*) *Blackshirt Division* was at Sidi Barrani and not west of it, as had been believed. The presence of the *64th Division* in a group of camps in the Khur-Samalus area had not been known. The whole *63rd* was in the Sofafi camps. The forward Italian divisions—*1st* and *2nd Libyan* and *4th Blackshirt*—comprised the *Group of Libyan Divisions*, the equivalent

[9] These were the *60th, 61st, 62nd, 63rd, 64th; 1st, 2nd* and *4th Blackshirt;* two Libyan divisions and one mixed division.

[1] The Italian staff on the other hand over-estimated the opposing army, which they believed to include two armoured and two motorised divisions.

of a corps. Echeloned behind it was the *XXI Corps*, with the *64th Division* at Samalus-Khur and the *63rd* at Sofafi-Rabia; and, farther west, the *XXIII Corps* (*1st* and *2nd Blackshirt* and *62nd Divisions*).



Italian dispositions at Sidi Barrani.

However, the odds were not so greatly against the attacking force as a bald listing of the formations suggests. The Indian division, with its added brigade of British regulars, had the infantry strength of two Italian divisions; the two Libyan divisions were weak in numbers and fire power and of poor quality; and whereas O'Connor possessed a full armoured division and a battalion of heavy tanks the Italian tanks were dispersed and used ineffectively. In the Maktila-Buq Buq-Sofafi triangle it was (in British terms) a battle of one armoured and the equivalent almost of two infantry divisions against the equivalent of three infantry divisions. The attackers were well-led, confident and expert and possessed a weapon of surprise—tanks which need not fear the enemy's guns. The defenders were clumsy, timid and unenterprising. A determined counter-attack by the reserve divisions might have stopped the attack, but the four divisions at Sofafi and west of Buq Buq—a stronger force than that actually engaged—made no effort to intervene, but were in haste to withdraw behind the fortified line at Bardia. The escape of the *63rd Division* was a result rather of the errors of the attackers than of the skill of the Italian commander. The Support Group was not used to prevent its withdrawal on the 9th or 10th; on the 10th the Hussars were on the southern fringe of the Sofafi camps and were withdrawn, though they were given no other role that day. The late arrival of orders for the 4th Armoured Brigade delayed its pursuit south of the escarpment, but even if the orders had arrived in time the brigade could not have reached Sofafi before the Italians had withdrawn.

In brief, the attacking force succeeded in slicing off the leading corps of the Italian army, pinning them against the sea and destroying them; in the pursuit one of the supporting divisions was practically destroyed; the remaining divisions, some gravely battered, retired towards Bardia, where the *1st Blackshirt* was already stationed. After the battle the Italians considered that of the eight divisions deployed from Bardia eastwards, the *64th* and the *4th Blackshirt, 1st* and *2nd Libyan* were virtually destroyed, leaving four and remnants of others to defend the fortress. (But at the time the extent of the damage done to the enemy at Sidi Barrani was over-estimated by the British Intelligence staffs and the force withdrawn to Bardia correspondingly under-estimated.)

It will be recalled that General Wavell had decided before the battle began to open an offensive against the Italians in Abyssinia early in the coming year, using both the 5th Indian Division and the 4th, which would be replaced in the desert by the 6th Australian. As soon as the 4th Indian Division had completed its role in the Sidi Barrani battle he decided to send it to the Sudan as soon as possible, leaving the armoured division and the 16th Brigade to carry out the pursuit. Difficulties of supply would have prevented the Indians joining the pursuing force immediately and, unless they departed soon, they could not reach the Sudan in time for an offensive timed for early February. Therefore, on 14th December the 4th Indian Division left the battlefield for Maaten Bagush, leaving the 16th Brigade in occupation of Sidi Barrani.

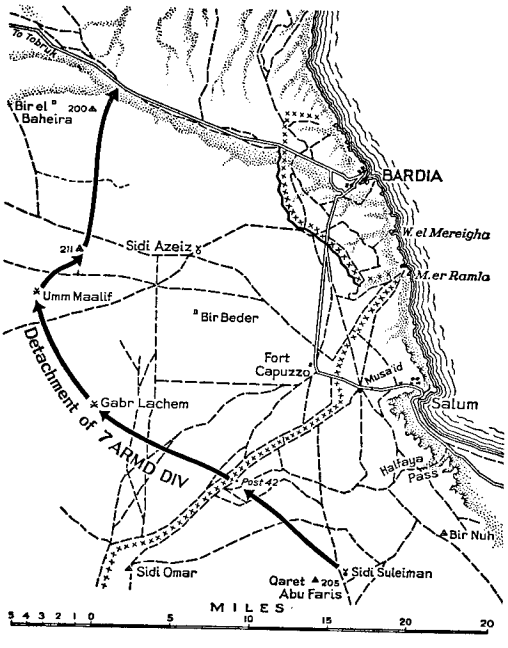
Meanwhile the 7th Armoured Division, with no more infantry than its Support Group contained, continued to press the retreating enemy. On the 12th December the headquarters of the division was eight miles east of Sofafi, its 7th Brigade in the Buq Buq area, the Support Group in the Sofafi area, and the 4th Brigade, pursuing the enemy north-west, had reached Bir el Khireigat. The armoured cars of the 11th Hussars were in contact with the Italians on a line from Halfaya Pass to Sidi Omar, where an enemy rearguard was resisting strongly.

Next day plans were made to cut the road from Bardia to Tobruk and thus isolate the garrison. An advance-guard of the division, consisting of part of the ubiquitous 11th Hussars, part of the 4th Royal Horse Artillery and a squadron of tanks, advanced through Qaret Abu Faris, Gabr Lachem, Umm Maalif, crossed the Trigh Capuzzo (the track parallel to the main road and about fifteen miles south of it) at Point 211 and by 10 a.m. on the 14th its patrols were overlooking the Bardia-Tobruk road from Bir el Baheira, and cut telephone wires along it. By nightfall a strong detachment of the 4th Armoured Brigade, including the 2nd Royal Tank, had patrols on the main road. In the course of the day bodies of Italian troops were found by the 4th Armoured Brigade and the Support Group to be in Fort Capuzzo, Salum, Sidi Suleiman, Halfaya and Sidi Omar (which was surrounded).

On the 15th the enemy still held Sidi Omar, Fort Capuzzo and Salum. On the western flank the 7th Hussars found the Gambut airfield abandoned, but the 7th Brigade, advancing northward between Capuzzo and

Sidi Omar, reached the Trigh Capuzzo east of Sidi Azeiz, but their efforts to get astride the Capuzzo-Bardia road were held by strong artillery fire from a flank-guard evidently posted there to enable the forces in Capuzzo and Salum to reach Bardia. That night the 7th Brigade was on a general line Sidi Suleiman-Boundary Post 42-Bir Beder-east of Sidi Omar.

Thus, while the advance-guard was meeting little opposition from ground troops west of Bardia (though it was being subjected to frequent air attacks), in the Bardia-Capuzzo-Salum triangle the enemy was holding his ground. So severe became the air attacks and so difficult the supplying of the advance-guard that, on the 16th, 11th Hussars were withdrawn into reserve south of Sidi Suleiman, and the 4th Brigade took over the task of capturing Sidi Omar, which was taken that evening. Meanwhile, during the day the enemy withdrew from the Salum-Capuzzo-Marsa Er Ramla triangle into Bardia, followed by patrols of the Support Group; and at the same time he abandoned his posts along the frontier between Sidi Omar and Giarabub.[2] By the night of the 16th he was concentrated within the Bardia fortress on the coast and at Giarabub far to the south on the edge of the Great Sand Sea.



It will be recalled that during October and November Hitler had continued to seek an agreement with Spain whereby she would cooperate in an attack on Gibraltar. In the opening days of December the German intentions for the late winter and early spring were to capture Gibraltar, then overrun Greece; later in the year they would take Egypt. However, on 7th December the wary Franco announced definitely to a German envoy that he could not take part in an operation against Gibraltar on 10th January, as planned; he feared that, if he did so, Britain would occupy his African colonies; he lacked supplies, and his forces were unready. Thereupon Hitler cancelled the orders for the Gibraltar operation and advised Italy to go on the defensive in North Africa, where she had

[2] See Chapter 12 for an account of the operations on the frontier south of Sidi Omar.

planned to resume her advance towards the end of December. Thus, when the British offensive in the Western Desert opened, Hitler's plans were again in the melting pot. The opening of that offensive was followed by a rapid series of German decisions. First, on 10th December, Hitler ordered (Directive No. 19) that plans be made to occupy Vichy France; secondly, on 13th December, he ordered (Directive No. 20) that the invasion of Greece was to take place probably in March; thirdly, on 18th December, he issued Directive No. 21 ("Barbarossa"), which required that preparations "to overthrow Soviet Russia in a rapid campaign" should be completed by 15th May. A decision to attack Russia in the spring of 1941 had been made by Hitler on 31st July 1940. The issue of Directive No. 21 was a further step in a program already arranged.

The British and Greek successes greatly disheartened Hitler's naval advisers, who had persistently urged that an Axis offensive in the Mediterranean was essential (and were alarmed by the decision to attack Russia). On 27th December Admiral Raeder reported to Hitler:

> The enemy has assumed the initiative at all points and is everywhere conducting successful offensive actions—in Greece, Albania, Libya and East Africa . . . . The decisive action in the Mediterranean for which we had hoped is . . . no longer possible.

CHAPTER 7

BEFORE BARDIA

FOUR days before the attack on Sidi Barrani opened General Mackay had been instructed to move his 16th Brigade forward to occupy the box defences at Maaten Bagush, and was warned that the whole division would move into the desert about the end of December. On the 12th, therefore, at first in clear, still weather but later into a wind which whipped up the dust until it was as thick as a fog, the trucks of the 16th Brigade, bearing the leaping-kangaroo sign which the division had adopted, moved out along the desert road. For two days news of the astonishing victory at Sidi Barrani had been coming back. The men were excited, and anxious to be in the battle before it was too late and the armoured division had swept the Italians off the face of the desert. The vehicles arrived at Sidi Haneish on the west face of the Bagush "box" in darkness and thick dust (most of the infantrymen travelled by train) and on the morning of the 13th the men awoke to hear bombs falling near by.

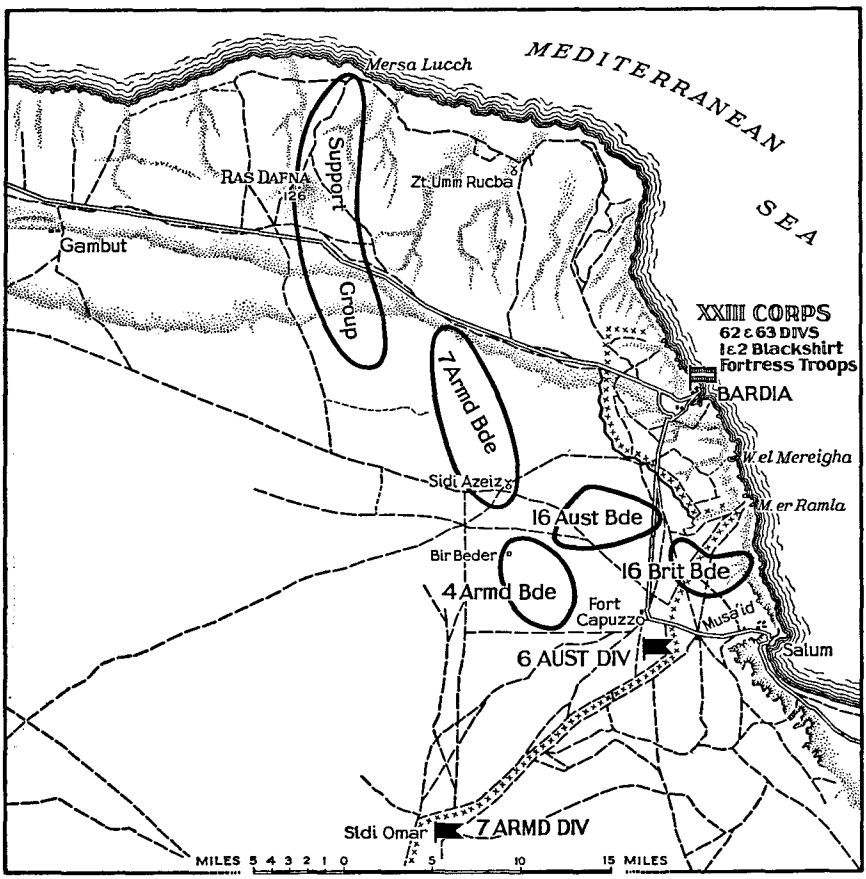
Before the brigade departed for Maaten Bagush, Mackay had received orders that his division would relieve the 4th Indian on the right flank of the British advance. When he and Colonel Berryman,[1] his senior staff officer, arrived at General O'Connor's Western Desert Force headquarters on 14th December for a conference, which General Wavell also attended, they found both these commanders and also their staffs in a buoyant mood. The suddenness of the Italian collapse at Sidi Barrani and the low price that had been paid for it had persuaded at least some of the staff that in Libya the war was virtually over—a reaction that was perhaps to be expected at a headquarters which had planned and witnessed the first British victory on land in a war which was more than a year old. Intelligence officers had summed up the situation after Sidi Barrani in the words: "There is no doubt that the Italian Army in Libya as an effective force is finished." Captured documents revealed that the Italians had estimated the forces opposed to them in Egypt at thirteen divisions, including four Australian, whereas there were actually only six divisions (including one complete Australian) in both Egypt and Palestine; the documents also showed that the Italians lacked, or believed they lacked, enough motor transport to carry out their planned offensive beyond Sidi Barrani, and that they had been fearful of a strong British out-flanking attack by two armoured divisions on Bardia and Tobruk. O'Connor's Intelligence staff considered that there was "every indication" that Bardia would be abandoned.

In view of this possibility Wavell, at that conference, ordered that the 19th Australian Brigade should be warned to be ready to embark at

[1] Lt-Gen Sir Frank Berryman, KCVO, CB, CBE, DSO, VX20308. (1st AIF: 4 AFA Bde and BM 7 Inf Bde. GSO1l 6 Div 1940-41; CRA 7 Div 1941; Dep CGS LHQ 1942-44; Comd II and I Corps during 1944; Ch of Staff Adv LHQ 1944-45. Regular soldier; of Melbourne; b. Geelong, Vic, 11 Apr 1894.

Alexandria and move to Bardia by sea to occupy the fortress, if abandoned. At the same time he ordered Mackay to move the remainder of his divisional headquarters and the 17th Brigade group forward on 22nd December, the 19th Brigade to follow later if the seaborne move to Bardia became impracticable.

On the following days the westward move of the Australian division continued. On 17th December the 16th Brigade, now directly under O'Connor's command, was taken in trucks to a point between Sidi Barrani



The encirclement of Bardia, December 1940.

and Buq Buq, passing abandoned Italian camps, still littered with broken tanks and discarded weapons, and with tattered clothing and torn paper tangled in the low camel bush. After two long journeys there was still no sign of the enemy except green and red tracer shells sent up over Bardia against night bombers, but rumours were coming back of the speed at which the armoured division was advancing. However, when the

Australians arrived at Salum on 18th December, they were only five miles from the infantry battalions of the 7th Armoured Division, which, with their right on the sea, were lying about four miles outside the perimeter of Bardia. On the 19th, the 16th Brigade began marching up the Salum escarpment by Halfaya Pass into Cyrenaica, to take a place in a sector of "the front line", a chain of shallow slit trenches burrowed into the stony desert.

Thus the Australian division was strung out at various points from Alexandria to a few miles east of Bardia. The 17th Brigade was at Sidi Haneish; Mackay's advanced headquarters at Sidi Barrani. The previous day Mackay had been ordered to take command of all troops in the Salum area at noon on 21st December. At the outset his command would include the 16th British Brigade which was to relieve one battalion of the Support Group of the armoured division, while the 16th Australian Brigade relieved the other. The task of the armoured division was now to prevent enemy reinforcements reaching Gambut and Bardia, the 11th Hussars and the Support Group watching the Bardia-Tobruk road, the 7th Brigade watching the road from El Adem, and the 4th Brigade being in reserve.

For some days O'Connor had hoped that bombardment from the sea and air and by his own artillery might persuade the Bardia garrison to surrender, but there was now no real doubt that the Italians intended to hold Bardia.[2] It was estimated at O'Connor's headquarters on the 20th that most of the *62nd (Marmarica)* and *63rd (Cyrene) Divisions* and the remnants of the divisions defeated at Sidi Barrani were occupying the perimeter at Bardia—say 18,000 to 20,000 troops all told. When Mackay and Berryman conferred with him, O'Connor suggested that the Australian brigades should make a series of raids covered by artillery bombardments, and that a successful raid might enable them to establish a bridgehead inside the defences. The attack was not to be hurried, yet there was no time to waste, he said. He wished Mackay to deal with the Italians in Bardia—supposedly remnants of a defeated army—with two brigades, the third to be held ready to continue the advance to Tobruk.

The division now taking its place in the battle zone had not yet overcome the galling shortages of equipment that had plagued it during the training period, nor did it possess all its units. Its divisional cavalry regiment (except for one squadron) was 140 miles away harassing the stronghold of Giarabub. It had only two artillery regiments; the third was at sea on its way from England and not due to land at Suez until 22nd December. Of the two artillery regiments only one—the 2/1st—was armed with the new 25-pounder guns and its equipment of twenty-four of these guns had been completed only on 2nd December. The 2/2nd Regiment had twelve 18-pounders and twelve 4.5-inch howitzers of 1914-18 model, brought from Australia. The division's lack of a machine-gun battalion (which though not part of the establishment of a division was normally attached when it went into battle) was remedied by the presence

[2] As late as 18 Dec rumours were reaching the forward Australian troops that Bardia was being abandoned.

in Western Desert Force of the 1/Northumberland Fusiliers, a British regular machine-gun battalion which was placed under Mackay's command. The division's anti-tank regiment had been diverted to England, but each infantry brigade had organised an anti-tank company. The recognised establishment of each such company included nine 2-pounder guns, but in fact only the 16th Company had so many; the 17th had two and the 19th none at all. The cavalry squadron then with the division had twenty very worn carriers, though in such a unit there should have been a proportion of light tanks and there were none; each carrier was armed with a Vickers machine-gun or an anti-tank rifle, but this had been ensured only by borrowing some of these weapons from the Mersa Matruh fortress troops. Ammunition for anti-tank rifles was so short that, before the weapons were used in action, each man was allowed to fire only one shot; and, to conserve ammunition, the Vickers guns had fired only one or two shots before battle. The men of some infantry units had not handled a live grenade until they received some at Sidi Haneish. The carrier platoons of the infantry battalions were variously equipped; some when they crossed the frontier had their full equipment, others had none. Most of the battalions lacked their full equipment of mortars.

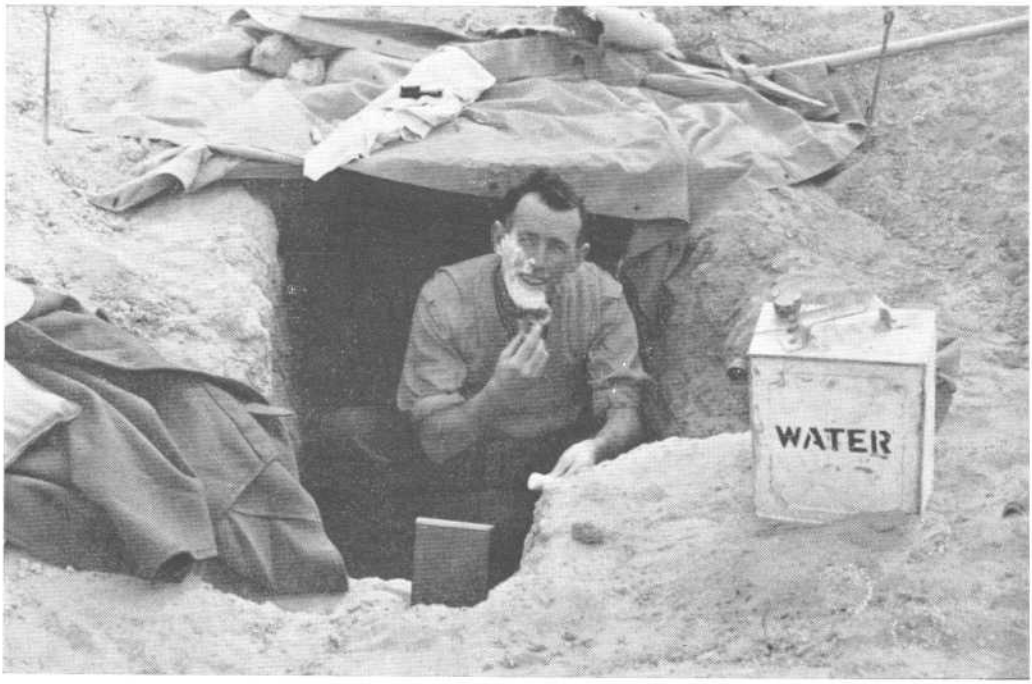
However, it was the shortage of vehicles rather than weapons which caused most concern to the commander and his staff. As a partial remedy a convoy of 180 trucks was being hurried forward from the camps of the recently-arrived 7th Australian Division in Palestine to the Libyan frontier to reinforce the 16th and 17th Brigades, which had been moved up to the frontier largely in borrowed trucks; Italian vehicles captured at Sidi Barrani were used later.

The anxiety about the shortage of transport will be appreciated if the reader pictures the country which lay ahead. From the frontier to the Gulf of Sidra on which Benghazi lies, Cyrenaica resembles the western desert of Egypt except in the north-west between Derna on the east and the fertile farm lands of Benghazi on the west. In that area rises the Jebel Achdar (Green Highlands), a tableland 150 miles from east to west on whose wooded northern slopes enough rain falls to make farming possible. Between its western edge and the sea is a narrow strip of wheat land. Apart from the highlands the desert is low and arid, receiving only enough rain to support scattered clumps of drought-resistant camel bush. Fierce winds blowing over the dry land, from which man and his animals have removed all but these vestiges of cover, have eroded the desert, and it descends to the sea in a series of low irregular cliffs or escarpments. On the coast, wind and water have carved steep ravines into the cliffs. The floor of the desert is in some parts so smooth and firm that a motor-car can drive over it at high speed without discomfort, in others serrated by small wadis, or covered with stones. There are potholes of soft sand but the continuous sand dunes characteristic of the Libyan desert proper do not, in this part, begin until 100 miles or more from the coast. It was on the shelf between the Great Sand Sea to the south and the Mediterranean on the north that the desert campaigns were fought.

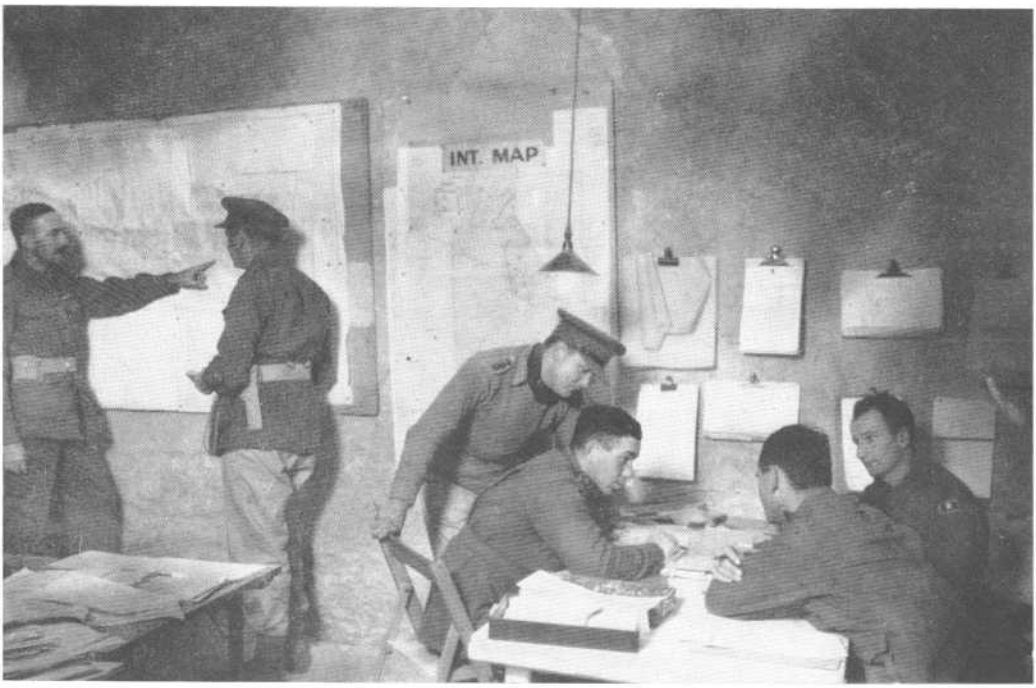


(Australian War Memorial photo)

Lieut-General R. N. O'Connor, who commanded the XIII Corps, and Major-General I. G. Mackay.



The men lived in holes dug out of the ground. The C.O. of the 2/2nd Battalion, Lieut-Colonel F. O. Chilton, at Bardia, 26th December 1940.



(Australian War Memorial photos)

The 6th Division Intelligence section at work in an Italian underground cistern at Bardia on 30th December 1940. Left to right: Lt-Col J. D. Rogers (I Aust Corps); Capt D. J. H. Lovell; Capt A. J. S. Cotter; Capt B. R. Grieve (liaison officer); Capt R. R. Vial, and the Intelligence sergeant, D. M. Macrae.

Few tracts of country anywhere presented fewer natural obstacles to the free movement of military vehicles; they could be manoeuvred here as if in a great arena. On the other hand, the rough going caused rapid wear and tear, and winds, drought, dust and extremes of temperature made campaigning uncomfortable even for troops well supplied with vehicles and gear. The wind might blow so strongly that it whipped up the harsh dust until for perhaps a whole day a vehicle five yards away would be invisible. In winter the nights were bitter, yet the days could be uncomfortably hot, and little shelter from cold, heat or wind was to be found. Yet to soldiers the desert offered two advantages: it was dry and free from disease; and the absence of towns and settled people over all the battlefield until Derna was reached meant that there were no refugees and no danger that civilians would be killed or wounded by bombing or gun-fire.

From the Egyptian rail-head at Mersa Matruh to Benghazi and beyond it one metalled road travelled across desert and mountain, although from Sidi Barrani to the frontier this road was paved only with loose metal which the Italians had heaped on it in an interrupted effort to improve the line of communication with their army in Egypt. Elsewhere were merely the tracks which vehicles had cut in the desert floor, and these were generally so worn and potholed that even in still weather the dust billowed high round the wheels of each moving vehicle and rose in a long plume behind it; in wind it became a general fog. At Bardia, Tobruk and other places in these neighbourhoods the Italians had dug for, pumped and reticulated substantial supplies of water which, though somewhat brackish, was drinkable, but elsewhere water would have to be carted.

It will be recalled that to defend Cyrenaica against invasion the Italians had fortified the two easternmost towns along the coast—Bardia, fifteen miles across the frontier, and Tobruk, sixty miles farther west. At great expense of labour, steel and concrete, they had dug a defensive line in the form of an arc eighteen miles in length round the little harbour and garrison town of Bardia. Plans of these defences captured at Sidi Barrani showed that they consisted of an almost continuous anti-tank ditch and behind it a double line of underground posts, the front line being linked by rows of barbed wire. The posts in the forward line were generally about 800 yards apart and each was protected by its own anti-tank trench (later found to be concealed by a roof of thin boards). They were armed with one or two 47-mm guns and from two to four machine-guns. The guns were fired from concrete-sided pits connected by trenches with a deep underground shelter which occupied most of the area of the post. This shelter offered almost complete protection against any but the heaviest of shells, but they were not good places to fight from, there being no overhead cover for the men in the gun and machine-gun posts, and no fire-step in the connecting trenches. Four hundred yards behind the forward line lay a second arc of posts, similar but lacking an anti-tank trench and sometimes without wire. The posts were numbered consecutively from south to north, odd numbers for the outer posts and even numbers for the inner, and the

numbers were marked on the maps and on the posts themselves—a convenience for an attacker because it helped him to discover exactly where he was. Within this perimeter aerial photography revealed a considerable array of artillery, estimated at 110 guns, and some long stone breastworks. Each flank of the line lay on the inner bank of one of the steep-sided wadis carved into the cliffs forming the coast from Salum northwards, but elsewhere the posts were in flat, almost featureless ground offering little cover to an attacker, and few landmarks. Water was supplied to the garrison by wells from which 200 tons a day were pumped and distributed in pipes to points within the perimeter and also, in normal conditions, to Fort Capuzzo. Part of the little town lay at the top of a cliff overlooking the northern shore of the bay forming the harbour and part below the cliff, on the shore of the harbour itself.

When we took our leave of the leading troops of the 6th Division on 19th December the 16th Brigade was moving forward to take a place on the flank of the armoured division which was patrolling around the Italian fortress.[3] A little before midnight on the 19th-20th the column reached the frontier wire and before dawn the 2/2nd Battalion had taken over positions astride the Capuzzo-Bardia road held by the 1/King's Royal Rifle Corps, one of the two motorised battalions of the armoured division. When dawn came they found themselves deployed on a wide flat dusty plain. Bardia lay ahead over the straight horizon. A bitterly cold wind blew and the infantrymen wore every garment they possessed. The ground was so stony that it was difficult to find places where trenches could be dug even with crowbars; soon the men learnt to look for places where the desert rats had dug their holes because the soil was likely to be softer and with fewer stones. On the night of the 20th December the 2/3rd Battalion went into position on the left of the 2/2nd. The 16th British Brigade was deployed on the right of the 16th Australian.

The Australian battalions were on the southern slope of a slight ridge about 5,000 to 7,000 yards from the Italian line, and consequently were invisible to the enemy, whose field of fire generally extended about 1,000 yards from his posts. Brigadier Allen was reluctant to place his front line on the exposed forward slopes, but maintained observation posts on them by day and patrolled them by night. A substantial force of artillery, including three field regiments and two batteries of medium guns and howitzers had now been hauled up the escarpment. With Allen's brigade was the 2/2nd Field Regiment which, when it arrived in the Capuzzo area on the 20th, found that it had been allotted positions out of range of the Italian posts, because General O'Connor's staff did not know that it was armed with obsolescent 18-pounders and 4.5 howitzers. At length the batteries went into position astride the road, practically in line with the infantry, where they came under sharp shell-fire. Consequently, on the

[3] While the brigade was at Salum a party of company commanders and platoon sergeants went forward to the British battalions above the escarpment for experience.

21st, five guns in each troop were moved back 500 yards leaving one forward to attract the Italian fire.

Allen and his battalion commanders had trained their junior leaders and men assiduously in night patrolling of the aggressive and skilful kind that Australians had prided themselves on in France in 1918. On the night of the 21st-22nd each of the newly-arrived battalions sent forward a patrol to find and measure the anti-tank ditch and the wire, and discover whether the posts were occupied by Italians or Libyans. The patrol from the 2/2nd on the right consisted of a platoon led by Warrant-Officer Lovett.[4] They steered their way past the Bir Sleiman and moving quietly, their boots muffled with sandbags, reached a position about thirty yards from the dimly-seen ditch beyond which they could make out the barbed wire obstacle. As Lovett and Private Honeywell[5] were preparing to cross the ditch a party of Italians appeared, talking and laughing, and established itself in the ditch. Lovett and his men withdrew without having been detected.

The 2/3rd Battalion's patrol, consisting of a platoon under Lieutenant Dennis Williams,[6] set out on a similar mission at 8 p.m. Dressed in great-coats, they steered with the aid of the only oil compass their company possessed, and, gauging the distance by counting their paces, marched their 7,000 yards and reached the anti-tank ditch at 11 p.m. The crescent moon had risen and they could see the wire beyond the ditch. They measured the ditch and found it fifteen feet wide but only two to three feet in depth with a two-foot parapet of spoil. Thence they moved to the wire which they found to be a "double-apron", that is to say a fence with a sloping face on each side, and about twelve feet wide. They moved along a track like a cattle pad between the main fence and another lighter fence until, from a few yards away an—evidently—Italian sentry shouted *"Chi va là?"* The Australians promptly went to ground. With much chattering and shouting the Italians threw grenades, fired first with rifles, then with machine-guns from a post about 150 yards away, and finally also with artillery at such close range that the noise was stunning and the crack of gun and of bursting shell were almost simultaneous. All the fire—probably part of a pre-arranged defensive fire plan—fell beyond the ditch. The patrol had done its task and, after five minutes, Williams gave the order to withdraw to the cover of the ditch and the men moved stealthily back, without a casualty. After about twenty minutes the firing died and the patrol returned the way it had come.

The same night Captain Embrey's[7] company of the 2/1st (which was in reserve on the left) drove forward six miles across the desert in trucks,

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[4] Lt H. I. Lovett, NX1598; 2/2 Bn. Journalist; of Coff's Harbour and Wellington, NSW; b. Wongarbon, NSW, 7 Oct 1906.

[5] WO2 H. J. Honeywell, NX9374; 2/2 Bn. (1914-18: RN Div.) Bushworker; of Leeton, NSW; b. Bristol, Eng. Killed in action 22 Nov 1942. (In his attestation papers Honeywell's date of birth is shown as 20 Nov 1905; but according to his comrades he was at least 15 years older. See "War Dog" (*Nulli Secundus Log*) pp. 99-100 for an eloquent tribute to this fine old soldier.)

[6] Maj D. E. Williams, NX4618; 2/3 Bn. School teacher; of Canberra; b. Bargoed, Wales, 5 Feb 1918.

[7] Lt-Col F. J. Embrey, NX127. 2/1 Bn 1939-44 and CO 37/52 Bn 1945. Public accountant; of Sydney; b. Sydney, 16 Mar 1913.

whence patrols marched three miles to within 400 yards of the enemy's lines between Posts 37 and 39.[8]

In the following week patrols went forward each night and, unnoticed by the Italians, continued to measure the ditch and wire at various points along the western side of the enemy's line, or else were detected and drew a deafening fire from the posts. When this occurred the men merely lay still, sometimes for two hours, until the fusillade ceased and then made their way back to their company's area, perhaps 6,000 yards away. Eventually men who went out on patrol wore sandshoes rather than muffled boots and, because they might have to lie motionless for hours at a time, dressed warmly, with sweaters over their jackets, balaclavas under steel helmets, mittens, scarves and long woollen underpants if they had them. From 22nd December onwards two or three engineers would generally accompany each infantry patrol to search for and disarm land mines and to reconnoitre the ditch and wire through which they would have to make a passage for the infantry when the attack was made.

On the night of the 23rd-24th occurred one of the few clashes in which shots were exchanged at close range. A patrol of sixteen men of the 2/1st Battalion under Lieutenant MacPherson[9] reached the ditch, whence MacPherson and two privates, Webb[1] and Kneen,[2] crawled 200 yards further to measure the wire. MacPherson then crawled under the wire. He had just done so when three Italians appeared. MacPherson shot one and possibly another. While Webb fired on the third MacPherson and Kneen crawled away and finally Webb followed.

Until the 24th December the patrols had examined the ditch and wire only southwards from Post 41. On the 24th Lieutenant Cann[3] and three engineers, with a party of the 2/1st Battalion, examined the ditch near Post 45, a mile farther north; the following night a company of the 2/1st under Captain Moriarty[4] patrolled along the western side of the ditch for a mile and a half opposite Posts 45 and 47. In addition, as mentioned above, the battalions established on the higher part of the ground small standing patrols whose task was to remain all day within a mile or two of the Italian line, report the enemy's movements, and return at dusk.

On the night of the 27th a patrol of the 2/2nd, commanded by Lieutenant Burrows,[5] was given a more aggressive task—not only to measure a section of the ditch and wire but to "harass the enemy and make the presence of the patrol felt." Consequently, having found a large Italian working party where men were singing and talking and had no

[8] The numbering of the posts is shown in a map at p. 170.

[9] Lt K. J. MacPherson, MC, NX240; 2/1 Bn. Clerk; of Roseville, NSW; b. Burwood, NSW, 17 May 1918. Killed in action 18 Apr 1941.

[1] WO2 B. N. Webb, NX7489; 2/1 Bn. Solicitor; of Alice Springs, NT; b. Adelaide, 29 Mar 1905. Killed in action 19 Apr 1941.

[2] Pte E. C. Kneen, DCM, NX8507; 2/1 Bn. Barman; of Bondi, NSW; b. Newcastle, NSW, 2 Mar 1920.

[3] Maj S. B. Cann, MBE, WX1533; 2/1 Fd Coy and OC 2/14 Fd Coy 1943-45. Architect; of North Perth, WA; b. Perth, 22 Aug 1915.

[4] Capt O. B. Moriarty, NX125; 2/1 Bn. Company representative; of Sydney; b. Braidwood, NSW, 25 Dec 1906. Killed in action 22 May 1941.

[5] Maj D. S. I. Burrows, NX9159; 2/2 Bn. Accountant; of Pymble, NSW; b. Sydney, 7 Aug 1915.

sentries posted, Burrows put down his patrol 250 yards from the ditch and they fired two magazines from each of their three Bren guns. There was no answering fire, and after ten minutes the patrol withdrew.

This scouting brought in information which, although it enabled Intelligence officers to fill in on their maps more and more detail about the wire and the ditch, was not as accurate as they desired; an error of one or two degrees in navigation across the wide plain could bring a patrol opposite the wrong post, and patrols were seldom quite sure where they had been. On the other hand the patrols had revealed that the Italian scouts and sentries, in the western sector at least, seldom ventured beyond their own ditch, and were disinclined actively to investigate suspicious sounds along their front. In addition, these nightly enterprises were enabling young leaders to put to the test the patrol tactics in which they had been rigorously trained in Palestine; after a week there were few men and hardly a subaltern or sergeant in the rifle companies who had not listened to and seen tracer bullets hissing over his head or shells bursting behind him.

Although the Italians spent much ammunition, there was not a casualty among the patrols, nor was the hostile artillery fire effective. The only casualties had been caused by the intermittent bombing of Salum harbour, of the roads leading from it, and of concentrations of vehicles. Up to Christmas Day some twenty men had been killed by bomb fragments; for example, an attack by about twenty bombers on the 2/3rd Battalion's positions on the 22nd killed three men and destroyed six vehicles. The Italian air force added to the discomfort of the headquarters and the services at Bardia by dropping "thermos bombs" behind the Australian lines. These bombs, which resembled a small thermos flask, were dropped in dozens. The shock of hitting the ground made the firing mechanism sensitive so that the four pounds of explosive would explode next time the bomb was touched. Units were advised to explode them by carefully looping round them a rope 100 yards long and towing them with a truck. If this failed they were towed into a heap and exploded by the engineers. They caused very few casualties.

Indeed, the discomforts the desert imposed were greater than those inflicted by the enemy. In that stony area it was a laborious task to dig even shallow ditches to give protection against artillery fire, bombs, wind and dust. The men roofed these holes with mottled green and brown Italian groundsheets or with iron and timber, and so gained some sleep by day in preparation for the bustle of activity which began when night fell. The water ration was half a gallon a man a day for all purposes; in practice this generally meant one bottle of unpleasantly saline water much of which was being brought by ships to Salum and stored in the wells at Capuzzo for drinking and washing. If a man shaved he could not wash his body. In still desert weather this would have been no great hardship, but for the first ten days outside Bardia the west wind blew and the dust was often dense. This dust, fine as talcum, would penetrate everything that was not tightly wrapped. The faces of men who had been working

or sleeping in it would be powdered yellow-grey. It would sift into packs and food and choke the mechanism of weapons.[6] It could form so thick a fog that it sometimes brought traffic to a standstill.

The staffs shared some discomforts of the forward troops. Until the 26th December Mackay's headquarters were in dugouts roofed with canvas, the general himself living in a hole dug into a small mound and covered with a tent-fly. Next day his offices were moved into one of the ancient cisterns that survive in the Libyan plateau—large excavations (this one sixty feet long) high enough to walk in without stooping, and entered through a small hole in the crust of the desert. The men usually had one hot meal a day, but on Christmas Day most dinners consisted of cold bully beef; during that day, however, each man in and out of the line received from the Australian Comforts Fund a parcel containing plum pudding and tinned cream, cake, fruit and cheese.[7]

It will be recalled that at the outset Mackay's command consisted of two brigades—the 16th British (less one battalion) on the eastern side of the Capuzzo road and the 16th Australian on the left. On the 27th, however, Savige's 17th Australian Brigade arrived and that night began to take the places of the two British battalions, the 2/2nd Battalion, and part of the 2/3rd. The British brigade went back to Buq Buq to rest in reserve, and the 2/2nd also marched to a rest area. The positions which Savige's right battalion (2/6th) took over from the 2/Queens, were about 4,000 yards from the left of the Italian line where it lay along the northern lip of the Wadi Muatered, a cleft 100 to 150 feet deep and 100 yards wide, with almost precipitous sides. The southern side of the Muatered was broken by tributary wadis so that the incoming troops faced country in which it was possible to find covered approaches to within a few hundred yards of the enemy's posts—an entirely different terrain to the almost flat area across which the neighbouring brigade faced the Italians. The batteries of the artillery regiment (the 2/2nd) now in support of the 17th Brigade were in position on the relatively level ground south of the tangle of wadis.[8]

On the 28th Savige instructed Colonel Godfrey[9] of the 2/6th to move considerably farther forward to the far bank of the Wadi Ramla, a short gully entering the sea 1,000 yards south of the mouth of the Muatered; he was also to occupy Point 125 (a survey point 125 metres above sea level on the far bank of the Wadi Ramla), to examine the Muatered itself and, that night and next, to reconnoitre Post 9.

These orders led to a series of patrols to which the enemy reacted more briskly than on the western face of the perimeter. That night (the 28th-

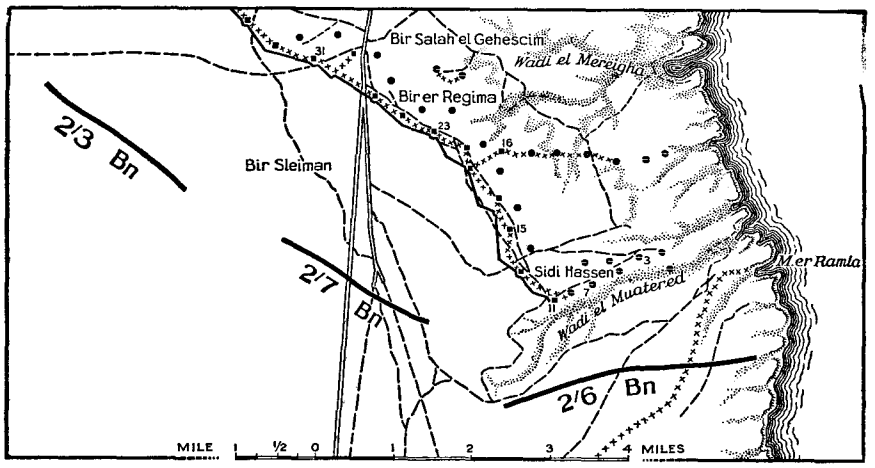
[6] At an inspection of weapons in the 2/2 Bn when it came out of the line on the 29th, it was found that only 6 of perhaps 50 Bren guns would then fire. At length it was found that the trouble could be overcome by cleaning all working parts with a dry rag, oiling them and then drying them with a clean rag.

[7] These were got forward as a result of the efforts of the forceful Assistant Commissioner, Major Eugene Gorman.

[8] Since the 24th the 2/1 Fd Regt had been in support of the 16th Bde, left of the road.

[9] Brig A. H. L. Godfrey, DSO, MC, VX25. (1st AIF: Capt 5 and 58 Bns.) CO 2/6 Bn 1939-41; Comd 24 Bde 1941-42. Auctioneer; of Newtown, Geelong, Vic; b. Camberwell, Vic, 26 Jan 1896. Killed in action 4 Nov 1942.

29th) three platoons were sent out, with two days' rations. On the right Lieutenant Sherlock[1] during the night reached the north bank of the Wadi Ramla (it formed the Egyptian-Libyan boundary there), discovered the frontier posts in that neighbourhood abandoned, found a good artillery observation post, remained in the wadi all that day and returned on the next. In the centre Lieutenant Paterson[2] and seven men patrolled to the south bank of the Muatered opposite Post 7, one of their tasks being to find an artillery observation post which could be defended by an infantry detachment, but, after they had returned to the rest of the platoon, which had been left 500 yards south of the wadi, they encountered an Italian outpost. The patrol's only Bren gun refused to fire. A Corporal Goble[3]



Forward battalions 6th Division 1st January 1941.

moved to the right with his rifle and some grenades to outflank the Italians but ran into another post and was seen to have been hit by a grenade and believed to have been killed. The platoon, being now under mortar fire and greatly outnumbered, withdrew. On the left a platoon commanded by Lieutenant Dexter[4] set out at 9 p.m. on a long march to the source of the Muatered. After moving 1,500 yards along it and investigating a series of sangars, all of which proved to be empty, Dexter went forward with three men along the bed of the wadi, evidently below Posts 11 and 9, without encountering an Italian.

As an outcome of these experiences Godfrey ordered his three forward companies to advance that night (the 29th-30th). By dawn they were extended along a 7,000-yard front from the south bank of the Wadi Ramla

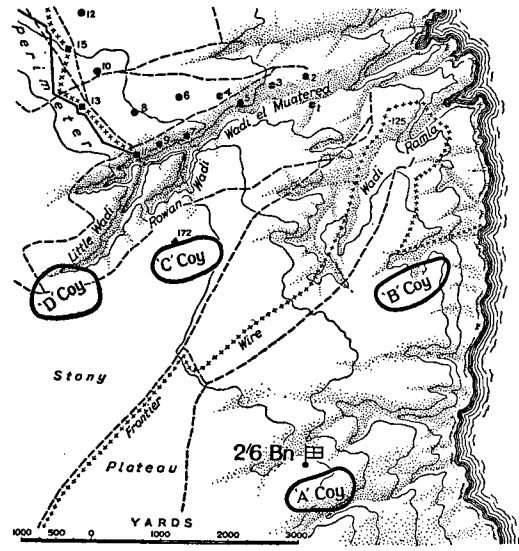
[1] Capt W. H. Sherlock, VX3561; 2/6 Bn. Grazier; of Coleraine, Vic; b. Malvern, Vic, 20 May 1908. Killed in action 29 Jan 1943.

[2] Lt J. B. Paterson, VX5070; 2/6 Bn. Clerk; of Geelong, Vic; b. Boort, Vic, 6 Dec 1904.

[3] Cpl E. C. Goble, VX5034; 2/6 Bn. Car painter; of Geelong, Vic; b. Palmerston North, NZ, 16 Apr 1905. Killed in action 29 Dec 1940.

[4] Lt-Col W. R. Dexter, DSO, VX5172. 2/6 Bn and CO 61 Bn 1944-45. Stock auctioneer and agent; of Geelong, Vic; b. Melbourne, 5 Jan 1914.

on the right to a position occupied by Captain Little's[5] company at the source of "Little" Wadi (a tributary of the Muatered) on the left. Late in the afternoon a party of Italians, about a company strong, emerged from Little Wadi and moved towards the gun positions of the 2/2nd Field Regiment. Little's company held its fire until the Italians were at close range. About seventeen enemy dead were left on the field and two prisoners (of the *63rd Division*) were taken. The Italians made no further attacks, but abandoned Point 172 after it had been heavily shelled. Lieut-Colonel Cremor[6] of the 2/2nd Field Regiment interpreted this Italian sortie as meaning that the enemy did not know that the infantry had moved so far forward, and the troops Little had stopped were setting out to raid his left battery which was little more than a mile from the scene of this action. As a precaution, it was withdrawn farther south.



The probing of the Italian defences by the infantry and engineers, added to the information gained from captured maps and documents, was providing a progressively clearer picture of those defences and the habits of the garrison, and enabling the commanders to plan an attack with increasing confidence. An outline plan of attack had been suggested by O'Connor. "It seemed to me," wrote O'Connor afterwards,[7] "that some plan would have to be made which would ensure that the few remaining 'I' tanks succeeded in getting safely across the anti-tank ditch and the minefields, and that this could only be done by an infantry attack on a narrow front against the enemy front line preceding the advance of the tanks. If successful, a bridge could then be made over the anti-tank trench and a path through the minefields cleared. I instructed him (Mackay) to think out something on these lines." This was on 24th December. Mackay decided that the capture of the fortress would require "operations

[5] Maj M. C. D. Little, MC, VX182; 2/6 Bn. Salesman; of Ballarat, Vic; b. Ballarat, 7 Aug 1907. (Little Wadi was named after him.)

[6] Brig W. E. Cremor, CBE, VX86. (1st AIF: Arty 1918.) CO 2/2 Fd Regt 1940-42; CRA 3 Div 1942-43; CCRA I Corps 1943-44, II Corps 1944-45. Secretary; of Malvern, Vic; b. Hampton, Vic, 12 Dec 1897.

[7] In a report written in an Italian prison camp in Apr 1941.

approaching those in France during 1916-18", and reported this to O'Connor, who promised maximum support by field and medium artillery, with 500 rounds a gun, and the use of the 7th Royal Tanks.[8]

Mackay and Berryman decided that surprise was essential; and, having achieved a break-through, they must exploit it rapidly. Prisoners and captured papers had now disclosed that the garrison of Bardia contained more formations than the Intelligence staffs had hitherto placed there—a total, indeed, of four divisions, the *62nd, 63rd, 64th* and the *1st Blackshirt,* though the first two were believed to be 30 per cent below strength and the 64th 80 per cent below. In spite of this Intelligence officers still were "doubtful if the fighting strength exceeded 20,000-23,000 with 110 guns". It was emphasised that the divisions each contained only seven battalions and each was organised on an establishment of only 8,500. When a prisoner informed his interrogators that he had seen six medium and seventy light tanks, the Intelligence staff commented that these figures seemed high. By the end of the month it was thought certain that the *62nd* and *63rd Divisions* were south of the Tobruk road, that the *1st Blackshirt* occupied the western part of the perimeter, and the depleted *2nd Blackshirt* was being held in reserve north of the Tobruk road.

Mackay, though he had only six of his nine infantry battalions, the 19th Brigade still being in the Delta area, had now been allotted a formidable assortment of artillery. In addition to his own two regiments, 2/1st and 2/2nd, each with twenty-four guns, he commanded the 104th Royal Horse Artillery (sixteen 25-pounders), "F" Battery, R.H.A. (twelve 25-pounders), the 51st Field Regiment (twenty-four 25-pounders) and the 7th Medium Regiment (eighteen guns and howitzers), making 118 guns, not including his few anti-tank and anti-aircraft weapons.[9] He could count on having under command the 7th Royal Tank, now with twenty-five tanks in running order. The armoured division, however, was to play a relatively passive part in the attack, lest it waste its more vulnerable tanks, of which, on 30th December, only 70 cruisers and 120 light tanks were in action, by using them against the Italian artillery. The armoured division was O'Connor's trump card and not to be used to take this trick. For the present it was to prevent the escape of the garrison from Bardia or the arrival of reinforcements from Tobruk, to assist the attack by demonstrations at the northern end of the perimeter and, finally, to advance on El Adem and isolate the Tobruk garrison as soon as Bardia had fallen. O'Connor instructed Mackay to have a brigade ready to advance on

[8] Report on Operations, 6th Australian Division, Libya, 12 Dec 40 to 7 Feb 41.

[9] The field and medium artillery regiments in XIII Corps at Bardia, and their armament were:

1	Regt RHA	16	25-pdrs
4	" "	24	"
104	" "	16	"
51	" "	24	"
2/1	Fd Regt RAA	24	"
2/2	" " "	12	4.5-in hows, 12 18-pdrs
7	Med Regt RA	2	60-pdrs, 8 6-in hows, 8 6-in guns
64	" " "	16	4.5-in guns

There were two anti-tank regts, 3 RHA and 106 RHA, armed with 2-pdr and Bofors (37-mm) guns, and three anti-tank companies (Australian) armed or to be armed with 2-pdrs.

Tobruk with the 7th Armoured Division on the third day of the battle. Such planning was made more practical when, at Mackay's urgent request, the 19th Brigade arrived in the forward area on 1st January.[1]

As the point of attack Berryman recommended to Mackay Posts 45 and 47. He contended that an advance there would lead to high ground overlooking the Italian positions; that the Italian commander would not expect a thrust to the left of the line then held by his enemy; and that a blow at the junction of two sectors (as the captured maps showed these posts to be) would be likely to lead to the enemy commander in the early stages receiving reports which would mislead him into imagining the assault to be on a wider front.[2] Berryman also stressed other advantages. When the leading brigade—Allen's 16th—reached the line of the Wadi Scemmas it would be difficult for the enemy to hit back with his tanks through that steep gully; at the same time the British tanks could attack downhill to the south over gently rolling ground, where their chief limitation would be their meagre capacity for carrying ammunition. Colonel Jerram[3] who commanded them guaranteed their ability to fight their way four and a half miles at most. One battalion of the 17th Brigade was to hold the right flank and the other two to continue the attack of the 16th Brigade. The 19th Brigade would be in reserve. To gain surprise, the artillery would be moved to the left flank only twenty-four hours before the attack and the fire based on survey methods and prediction.

On 28th December, at a conference at Mackay's headquarters attended by Allen, Herring and Jerram (but not Savige), the plan of attack was outlined. If enough artillery ammunition could be brought forward in time[4] Bardia would be attacked on 2nd January. Preceded by a party of engineers one battalion of Allen's brigade would attack before dawn from a starting-line 1,000 yards from and parallel to the defences opposite Posts 45, 46 and 47. When the engineers had broken down the anti-tank ditch in six places and cut six gaps in the wire the battalion would take several posts farther north and a battery which lay to the east of them. A second battalion, accompanied by three troops of tanks, would advance through the breach, turn south-east and "mop up" the posts along the perimeter

[1] It travelled 350 miles in two days in vehicles provided by the New Zealand Motor Transport Company.

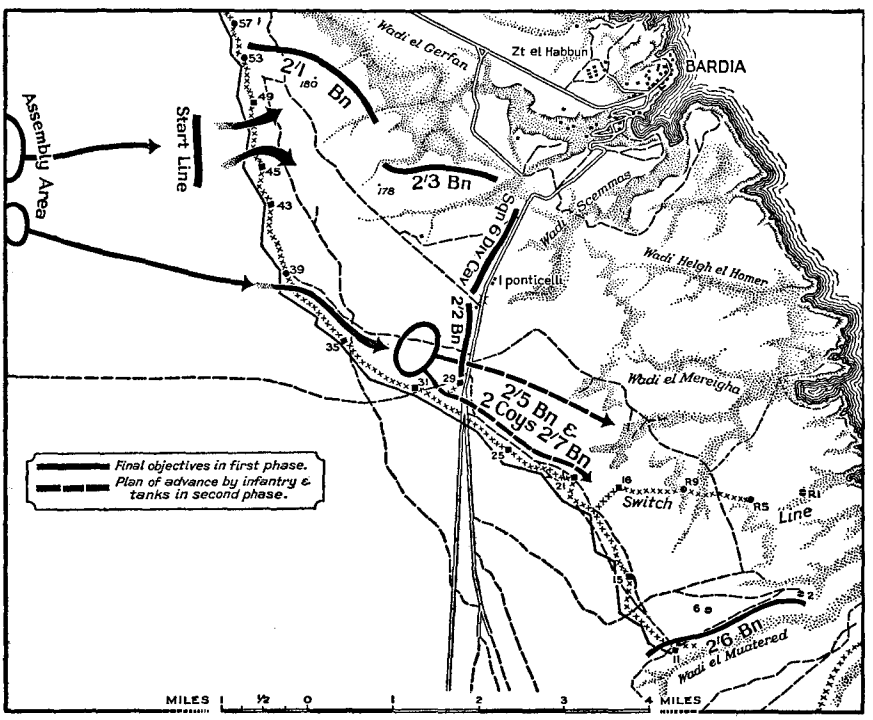
[2] Several attempts to locate by patrolling the exact position on the ground of Posts 45 and 47 had been unsuccessful owing to the flat, featureless nature of the country and the extremely wide no-man's land. To solve this problem Allen's brigade major, Ian Campbell, made use of the few, faint landmarks shown on aerial photographs and worked out a circuitous route over the desert to the anti-tank ditch opposite Post 45. This route involved an approach march for a night patrol of approximately six miles, with a different return route of approximately the same length. On the night of 27-28 Dec Campbell led a patrol of 8 men from 2/1 Bn by this planned route and accurately located the positions of Posts 45 and 47 and the anti-tank minefields protecting them. On the night of 29-30 Campbell took out another patrol which included Captain D. R. Jackson, adjutant of 2/1 Bn. Working back from the anti-tank ditch between Posts 45 and 47, this patrol surveyed and marked the position of the centre of the start-line and the route back from it to the assembly area.

[3] Brig R. M. Jerram, DSO, MC. CO 7 Bn RTR 1940-41; Comd 33 Army Tank Bde 1941-42. Regular soldier; b. Hampstead, Eng, 10 Nov 1895. (After the battle Jerram, who had served in the tank corps in the previous war, wrote to the OC 2/1 Fd Coy expressing appreciation of "the magnificent effort of you and your unit which enabled us to get into the Bardia defences." "You may not know," he added, "that Australian troops volunteered to mine-sweep for us in 1918. This has never been forgotten by us . . .")

[4] Mackay insisted that the attack should not be made until 125 rounds per gun were forward; it was postponed until 3 Jan to enable this to be done.

until it reached a line along the main road running north into Bardia. A third battalion would advance to a line lying from Point 178 to a point 2,700 yards east of it. The plan for the second phase would be decided later.

Two days later a further conference was held at Mackay's headquarters, this time attended also by Savige whose battalions were now patrolling the southern sector. It was followed by a second conference on the 31st. Zero hour was fixed at 5.30 a.m., the role of Allen's battalions was discussed and the role of Savige's brigade briefly outlined. In general terms (for, as will be seen later, there was question as to the details of the 17th Brigade's role) the task of part of this brigade was to be to follow the 16th into the perimeter, wheel right and advance from the Bardia-Capuzzo road



The plan of attack.

against the right of the Switch Line, a chain of posts which cut off the southern end of the fortress and created there what amounted to an independent redoubt measuring 5,000 yards by 4,000 at its widest parts. Colonel Jerram estimated that not fewer than six tanks would be available to support this attack. Another part of the 17th Brigade—the 2/6th Battalion—would exert pressure on the southern face of this subsidiary fortress. Within the southern area positions for at least four regiments of artillery had been identified, including the medium guns (collectively

known as "Bardia Bill") which used to shell Salum, and just north of the Switch Line and between it and the Bardia-Capuzzo road were positions for an even stronger concentration of guns. Indeed, the majority of the Italian gun positions that had been located were in this southern corner, where also the enemy infantry had proved themselves to be more enterprising than those in the western sector. Savige, who had had experience of interpretation of air photographs in 1916-17, considered that the gun positions south of the Bardia road were occupied, but Herring and his staff were convinced that most were empty.

At this conference Savige raised the question of a raid (which the divisional staff had proposed) by a company of the 2/6th Battalion on the day before the attack opened. He said that he believed he had fulfilled his initial role of misleading the enemy concerning the point where the main blow would fall, and that such a raid, in such rough country, against alert troops strongly supported by artillery was bound to fail. It was agreed that the raid would not take place.

In Allen's brigade the detailed orders provided that, after twenty-five minutes of artillery bombardment, the leading battalion (the 2/1st) and the engineers should, in the darkness, break their way through the Italian barbed wire and take four Italian posts. The battalion was given twenty-five minutes to move from start-line to the first two posts and another twenty-five minutes to take them. At 6.50 a.m., when it was light enough for their crews to see, four troops of tanks were to pass over crossings which the engineers had made in the anti-tank ditch and the minefields. One of these troops would join the 2/1st and, with it, advance north and north-east enlarging the bridgehead. The remaining tanks with the 2/2nd Battalion were to move south along the perimeter posts and the Italian batteries immediately behind them. The 2/3rd Battalion would then advance east through the gap to the edge of the first series of escarpments, followed by the squadron of the 6th Cavalry in its carriers, which would deploy and form a link between the 2/2nd Battalion on the right and the 2/3rd. Thus the 16th Brigade was to occupy a semi-circular area some 8,000 yards long and up to 3,000 yards deep. The advance of the 16th Brigade and the tanks was to be shielded by artillery fire.[5] From 5.30 to 5.55, ninety-six guns and howitzers were to fire on the front-line posts from 43 to 49 and the second-line posts from 42 to 46. Thus the fire of these guns, varying in calibre from 25-pounders to 60-pounder guns and 6-inch howitzers, would be concentrated on precise targets in an area 2,500 yards wide by 500 deep. At 5.55 a.m., when the infantry would attack Posts 45 and 47, the barrage would begin to move forward and out-

[5] The artillery units supporting the 16 Bde were "Frew Group" (commanded by Lt-Col J. H. Frowen) including F Bty RHA, 104 Regt RHA, 7 Med Regt RA, 2/1 Fd Regt and 51 Fd Regt. The remaining regiment, the 2/2, supported the 17 Bde. On the eve of the battle they were to be secretly concentrated in the shallow depression about 5,000 yards west of the point of entry. The positions were fixed by a troop of the 6 Survey Regt and the guns would open fire without preliminary registration. Thus 96 guns were behind the assaulting brigade, leaving 24 to support the diversionary attack to be made by 2/6 Bn in the south. The artillery fire—120 guns in support of two brigades—was on a scale only a little smaller than that produced in France in 1917 and 1918. At Bullecourt, in April 1917, 162 guns and howitzers supported the 4 Aust Div attacking on a front of 3,000 yards. At Messines, in June 1917, there was a gun or howitzer to every 7 yards of front; in the opening phase at Bardia 96 guns supported an attack on

wards so as to fall on posts farther to the right and left and on Italian batteries some 1,500 yards behind the wire on the high ground between the posts and the escarpment. The aim of the fire plan was to smother the enemy's fire within 1,500 yards of the attacking infantry—the effective range of medium machine-guns. From 11.30 the guns of the 2/1st Field Regiment were to lift to Posts 20-24 east of the Bardia road, and to Italian batteries behind these posts in Little Italy and left and right of it, thus covering, it was hoped, the advance of the 2/5th and companies of the 2/7th Battalions along the perimeter and to the Switch Line.

The instructions given to Savige lacked the simplicity of those describing the role of the 16th Brigade. After the conferences mentioned above, the brigadiers returned to their various headquarters to prepare detailed orders from their notes, but, when the divisional order reached Savige, he found that it was in conflict with his own orders to his battalions in two respects. Whereas the divisional order[6] (for the details of which Berryman was responsible) provided that the 2/6th Battalion on the extreme right should "stage a demonstration against the south-west corner of the southern sector of the perimeter", Savige's orders to Godfrey of the 2/6th were to occupy the Wadi Muatered from Post 8 to Post 11, and they warned Godfrey that his further role might be to advance to the line of the road from Post 3 to Post 10 and beyond. And, whereas

a front of 800 yards. In September 1918, 360 guns supported the attack (by two divisions) on 7,000 yards of the Hindenberg Outpost Line.

The detailed artillery program on the central sector was:

Time	Target	No. of Guns	Rate rpgpm	Remarks
0530-0555 hrs	Posts in 1st Line 45-47	52-25 pdrs	3	Incl 8-6in hows to 0545 hrs
	Posts in 1st Line 43	12-25 pdrs	3	Incl 8-6in hows to 0545 hrs
	Posts in 1st Line 49	4-4.5 guns	2	Incl 8-6in hows to 0545 hrs
	Posts in 2nd Line 42	12-25 pdrs	3	At 0545 hrs 8-6in hows lift on to these Posts
	Posts in 2nd Line 44	4-4.5 guns	2	At 0545 hrs 8-6in hows lift on to these Posts
	Posts in 2nd Line 46	4-60 pdrs	2	At 0545 hrs 8-6in hows lift on to these Posts
0555-0620 hrs	Posts 42, 44, 46 and Posts to NE and S (these incl Post 43 which is bombarded by 16-25 pdrs)	36-25 pdrs	3 to 2	Fd Arty
		Remainder arty	3 to 2 2 to 1	Med Arty
0620-0655 hrs	Box around tank bridgehead. (Incls Post 43 which is bombarded by 16-25 pdrs)	All arty	1 to 2	Fd Arty
			1 to 1½	Med Arty
0655-0730 hrs	Arty concentration moves South on each post in turn to Posts 25, 24, 26 (Post 41 shelled from 0655-0709 hrs)	12 guns on each post for 10 mins		Arty concentration to move SE at rate of 5 mph
0655 onwards	Enemy Btys	Selected Med Btys		

[6] See Appendix 2.

the divisional order provided that the 2/7th would pick up the advance round the perimeter where the 2/2nd left off and, "as the attack of the 2/5th or the 7th Royal Tanks progresses", should advance along the perimeter, with Posts 11 and 9 as the final objective, Savige's order left the 2/7th, less one company, in reserve. The remaining company of the 2/7th was to come under command of the 2/5th Battalion which was to play the leading part in the second phase of the attack by advancing south-east to a line through Little Italy and near Post 16 where the Switch Line began. For this advance, which was to begin at 11.30 a.m., the 2/5th Battalion plus the attached company was to have the support of the same tanks that would have taken part with the 16th Brigade in the earlier phase of the battle.

When Savige received the divisional orders late on the night of 1st January he wrote asking that Berryman read his (Savige's) order, which, he said, represented "the only practical way to deal with the situation", and added that the 2/6th would be at least on the north face of the Wadi Muatered soon after the battle opened. He contended that the 2/7th should not be asked to make a long march across the enemy's front under the fire of "massed batteries in the south-east corner", and with a danger in the final stages of the 2/6th and 2/7th firing at one another as they pressed towards the same posts from opposite directions. He asked Berryman to submit the question to the general. This Berryman did at 7 o'clock on the morning of the 2nd and, as a result, Mackay issued an instruction to Savige repeating that the 2/6th would stage a demonstration, but adding that Savige might use his discretion about occupying the Wadi Muatered from Post 5 to 11; and making a second company of the 2/7th available to the commanding officer of the 2/5th. This instruction left the 2/7th (though now less two companies) in reserve as in Savige's orders. Savige then amended his orders to Godfrey by instructing him that at zero hour he would "demonstrate by fire" but not attack in the Wadi Muatered; that, at his discretion he might gain the north bank of the wadi, but he was not to move "north of the main wadi" until the tanks gained Post 10. However, Godfrey's orders to his company commanders opened with the words: "Intention: 2/6th Battalion will capture the enemy positions on the Wadi Muatered from Post 3 to Post 11."[1]

The divisional orders for the battle were afterwards criticised on the grounds that they were too detailed, in that, for example, they contained instructions for individual battalions, although the giving of such instructions is the responsibility of the brigade commander and, in fact, they had been given to the battalions by the brigade commanders before the divisional order was received. Savige's brigade had certainly been given a very complicated role, especially for inexperienced though well-trained troops. While one of his battalions demonstrated on the extreme right wing, another, reinforced by part of a third, was to pass through a neigh-

[1] It is possible that Godfrey had not the means of altering his orders in time.

bouring brigade at various points; at what might be a critical stage, one of his battalions would be facing north, parts of another entering the fight from the west and the third advancing south. On the other hand the fact that O'Connor wished the attack against a fortress of great physical strength to be carried through with only two brigades which were facing the enemy on a front of 20,000 yards presented the divisional commander with a very difficult problem which could not be solved without risk. Mackay's answer to the situation created by a conflict of orders was to give the benefit of the doubt to the brigade commander—the man who would have the actual handling of the troops in the coming battle.

With the object of concealing from the enemy where the attack would fall, no artillery concentrations had been fired and no offensive patrolling undertaken north of Post 39, and movement north of the Sidi Azeiz road had been reduced as far as possible. On the two nights before the eve of the attack, most of the batteries that were to support the break-through were moved northward to their new positions. The moves were begun as soon as possible after the completion of "the evening tasks" but it was ordered that the gun tractors should not go forward to haul the guns out before 6.15 p.m., when it would be dark enough to conceal them. So as to give no hint of the movement to enemy artillery observers and scouting aircraft, the tractors returned to their original positions after having placed the guns in their new positions. To conceal the move of the 2/1st Field Regiment its camouflage nets were left in position and, during the 2nd, single guns of the 2/2nd were distributed throughout the old gun pits and in the remaining pits abandoned Italian guns and dummies made from old wheels, stove pipes and pieces of timber were placed. The guns maintained a desultory fire on the 2/1st's previous targets and Italian grenades were burst at the muzzles of the dummies.

Before the staff conferences ended, the bombardment of the Bardia defences from the sea and air had begun. On 2nd January the monitor *Terror* and gunboats *Aphis* and *Ladybird* shelled targets from daylight until 2 p.m. Air force squadrons bombed the fortress area intermittently from 31st December onwards. On the night of the 1st, 20,000 pounds of bombs were dropped and on the night of the 2nd, 30,000 pounds.

Behind the lines, the administrative staff of the division, and particularly the ordnance corps, under Lieut-Colonel Pulver, the D.A.D.O.S. or deputy assistant director ordnance services, were making vigorous efforts to equip the division for the coming battle. "This is a 'Q' war," said Colonel Vasey, who had a taste for summing up a situation or a campaign in a single phrase. It was true that success depended on finding means of supplying a force 150 miles beyond its rail-head (Qasaba near Mersa Matruh) in almost waterless desert, especially as that force lacked equipment in the degree mentioned below.

The prelimanry operation orders issued on 30th December included instructions to Pulver to explore the captured area for Italian vehicles and stores, and discover whether the division could not to some extent "live on

the country". On that day the division was critically short of vehicles and their spare parts, oil, parts for Bren guns, and even clothing; the daily water ration of half a gallon did not enable a man to wash himself, much less his clothes. The nearest depot was at El Daba, seventy-five miles east of Mersa Matruh, and this was recently formed and had limited supplies. Because vehicles were so few, O'Connor had ordered that they be used to bring forward only rations, ammunition, petrol and spare parts for motor vehicles. In the last few days ninety-five additional vehicles were obtained from various sources as far afield as Palestine, and, of these, eighty were allotted to the task of carrying ammunition forward, all others available being sent to El Daba and Alexandria to pick up supplies. Arrangements were made to ferry stores from the Australian depot at the Citadel in Cairo to Ikingi Maryut.

On 1st January, when the preliminary moves before the battle were already being made, 11,500 sleeveless leather jerkins, a protection against cold and barbed wire, arrived and were distributed; two lorry-loads of springs and tyres arrived; ten carriers were repaired and distributed among the battalions, bringing their strength in these to about 70 per cent of their "war establishment". The next day 350 wire cutters, captured from the Italians, arrived and were distributed to the battalions that would attack next morning. The 17th Brigade received 3-inch mortars but they lacked sights. An officer raced to Cairo, collected sights and arrived back at Bardia just before the battalions began to move forward. At 7 p.m. on the 2nd there reached divisional headquarters 10,000 yards of tape to mark the ground over which the troops would attack, and 300 pairs of gloves to protect the hands of men cutting wire; the gloves were delivered to units that were already moving up to their assembly areas, but the tape did not reach the 16th Brigade in time and four-inch by two-inch rifle-cleaning flannelette torn into narrow strips was used instead.[8]

[8] The fine margin by which essential supplies and equipment reached the units before the battle is illustrated by these extracts which follow one another in the war diary of the AQ (or administrative) Branch of the HQ of 6th Division:
"2 Jan 41. Night.—Final requirements Arty Amn delivered to bty positions.
2000.—Tape, wire cutters and gloves received and delivered to 16 Aust and 17 Aust Inf Bdes, equally divided.
3 Jan 41 1100-1200.—Some 5,000 to 6,000 prisoners at 16 Aust Inf Bde Collecting Point."



(Australian War Memorial photo)

Australian infantry advancing towards Bardia, 3rd January 1941.



(Imperial War Museum photo)

Heavily-laden infantrymen advancing on Bardia.

CHAPTER 8

THE BATTLE OF BARDIA

DURING the 2nd January General Mackay visited each of the six attacking battalions. Outwardly he was the most calm among the leaders, yet it was probably only he and the other soldiers in the division who had taken part in setpiece attacks in France in the previous war who realised to the full the mishaps that could befall a night attack on a narrow front unless it was carried out with clock-like precision and unfailing dash. The younger leaders were excited, but determined that in their first battle they should not fail. To one of them it was like "the feeling before an exam". Afterwards their letters and comments revealed how sharply conscious many of them were that this was the test of their equality with "the old A.I.F." in which their fathers had served, and which, for them, was the sole founder of Australian military tradition.

"Tonight is the night," wrote the diarist of the 16th Brigade. "By this time tomorrow (1700 hrs) the fate of Bardia should be sealed. Everyone is happy, expectant, eager. Old timers say the spirit is the same as in the last war. Each truck-load was singing as we drove to the assembly point in the moonlight. All ranks carried a rum issue against the bleak morning . . . At 1930 hrs we passed the 'I' tanks, against the sky-line like a fleet of battle-cruisers, pennants flying . . . Infantry moving up all night, rugged, jesting, moon-etched against the darker background of no-man's land . . . The B.M. and party taped the start-line—historic . . . for it is the start-line of the Australian soldier in this war."

It will be recalled that Major Campbell, by patrolling forward to a point in the ditch about midway between Posts 45 and 47, quietly pacing 1,000 yards back at right angles to the Italian front and marking bushes there by tying rifle-cleaning rags on to them, had made an accurate landmark in the almost featureless desert. On the night of the 1st his Intelligence officer (Lieutenant Ferguson[1]) had laid 5,000 yards of signal wire to mark the route to this landmark.

Meanwhile the assault battalions had been moving into position at the western end of the narrow corridor along which they would march to the attack. The 2/1st arrived at the "assembly area" at 1.30 a.m. and part slept there on the ground until roused at 2.30; others remained awake watching their bombers attacking Bardia, and the tracer shells climbing into the sky. The men were heavily laden; each wore his woollen uniform with a sleeveless leather jerkin over or under the tunic, and most had also a greatcoat with the skirts turned back to allow freedom of movement. They wore steel helmets and had respirators hanging on their chests; some carried sandbags wrapped round their legs; and, in pouches, pockets and haversack, 150 rounds of ammunition, one or two grenades and three

[1] Lt-Col I. B. Ferguson, DSO, MC, NX2654; 2/2 Bn. CO 3 Bn RAR, Korea, 1950-51. Journalist; of Potts Point, NSW; b. Wellington, NZ, 13 Apr 1917.

days' rations of tinned beef and biscuits. They set out carrying picks and shovels but the combined load was too heavy and most of the tools were abandoned. On his back each man wore a patch of white cloth so that the following troops would recognise their own men—a device first used by Australians at Lone Pine in August 1915. It would be so cold waiting through the night that most had put on (or left on, because few had fully undressed for a week or more) woollen underclothes and sweaters, and some wore scarves and balaclavas. Some doubted whether, with such a weight of clothing and perhaps seventy pounds of gear, they could raise their weapons and fire and, waiting at the assembly area, they practised the motions.

At 2.30 a.m. the men ate a meal and drank their rum[2] and at 4.16 the leading companies began to move forward to the start-line in silence except for the swish of feet in the dry soil and low camel-bush. Lieut-Colonel Eather[3] led the 2/1st Battalion with Captain Moriarty's company on the right and Captain Dillon's[4] on the left, each with two of its platoons forward and one back, the two companies extending 300 yards from flank to flank. It was pitch dark. A few minutes after the leaders had arrived at the start-line and while the rear platoons were still moving forward, the barrage opened (at 5.30 a.m.) with a sudden sustained hammering of guns which lit up the horizon with a line of flashes and streaks of light. The sudden noise, the flash of guns, the sound of shells going overhead and crashing in the darkness had an exhilarating effect, dispelled the tension and produced excitement and confidence. Men began calling, singing, and shouting defiance at the enemy, the guns drowning their voices.

The leading platoons now advanced slowly from the taped line and with them six parties of engineers and pioneers, each party carrying bangalore torpedoes—pipes twelve feet in length loaded with ammonal—with which they were to blow gaps in the Italian wire. As they advanced Italian shells began to fall in the area, but mostly behind the leading troops. A shell burst among a leading platoon and a bangalore exploded, killing four men and wounding nine. Nearby a splinter cut through the steel helmet of Lieutenant Dawson,[5] one of whose tasks was to give the signal for blowing the gaps in the wire, and who commanded the bangalore parties. It cut his head and left him lying stunned on the ground. About 100 yards short

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[2] Rum was issued to most units, but Lt-Col England of the 2/3rd had wisely issued it to his men at the assembly area before they slept. Other commanding officers were influenced by the fact that the men were cold and weary, and issued the rum under careful supervision. After the battle many agreed that to issue rum before battle rather than afterwards when the men were tired was a mistake, and one which was hard to explain in the face of the fact that it was a general principle in the old AIF to issue it not before going into action but afterwards; and that the commanders of each of the attacking brigades and two of the six battalions had been infantry officers in that force. Mackay, when he learnt that rum was to be issued before the attack was disapproving, but did not countermand the order and allowed the issue to be repeated at Tobruk. At Tobruk pains were taken to ensure that no man had more than his share. (For the practice in the old AIF see C. E. W. Bean, *Official History of Australia in the War of 1914-18*, Vol. III (1929), pp. 639n-40n.)

[3] Maj-Gen K. W. Eather, CB, CBE, DSO, NX3. CO 2/1 Bn 1939-41; Comd 25 Bde 1941-45; GOC 11 Div 1945-46. Dental mechanic; of Bankstown, NSW; b. Sydney, 6 Jun 1901.

[4] Capt W. C. Dillon, NX41; 2/1 Bn. Representative agent; of Randwick, NSW; b. Paddington, NSW, 27 Apr 1904.

[5] Maj B. F. Dawson, WX34; 2/1 Fd Coy. Engr Draftsman; of Newdegate, WA; b. Katanning, WA, 3 Jan 1915.

of the Italian anti-tank ditch the line was halted and, after a short pause, while officers checked the positions of their men and waited for their own artillery fire to lift, seven parties each of three engineers (who did not know of the wounding of Dawson) moved forward. Spaced at sixty-yard intervals, they clambered through and beyond the ditch and each party slid two torpedoes underneath the wire, using the second to push the first beyond the far side of the twenty-foot wide fence. The torpedoes had two-foot fuses, and a few minutes before the time to light them—6 a.m.—Lieutenant Davey[6] of the engineers, who was on the spot to examine a possible minefield near Posts 45 and 47, became anxious about Dawson and began groping his way from one party to another in search of him. Moving cautiously along the ditch, pistol in hand, he was challenged by Johnston,[7] Dawson's platoon sergeant, who also had his pistol ready. Johnston, too, had failed to find Dawson, and Dawson had the Very pistol with which to fire the signal to light the fuses. Davey ordered Johnston to give the signal by blowing his whistle. Johnston blew but the din drowned the noise. Meanwhile Eather, who had become anxious, sought out one of the engineer parties and, learning that the signal had not been given, ordered that a torpedo be blown. The other teams followed this example.

When the infantrymen heard the torpedoes explode they rose to their feet and scrambled forward into the ditch whose sides the engineers were already breaking down with picks and shovels.[8] There Eather stood directing the platoons forward with his walking stick. Once through the wire Dillon's two leading platoons charged forward, Lieutenant Kennedy's[9] at Post 47, Lieutenant MacPherson's at 46, while his third platoon (Captain Travers[1]) gave supporting fire, with the Italian shells falling behind them. MacPherson detected what appeared to be an additional post just ahead of him with uncut wire in front of it. Instead of leading to the right through the gap in the wire, he took his men directly at the new post. In a few seconds they had cut the wire and were on top of the new position, which was discovered to be a kind of listening post manned by about twenty Italians who surrendered without inflicting a casualty. MacPherson's men hurried on towards Post 46, which was still silent, the Italians evidently being dazed by the artillery fire. Kennedy's platoon which had taken the surrender of six or seven Italians in a listening post between Posts 45 and 47, attacked 47, the Bren gunners firing from the hip. They cut the wire and had overcome the post before the enemy had time to fire more than a few ineffective bursts from one machine-gun.

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[6] Maj W. A. Davey, NX8934. 2/1 Fd Coy and OC 12 Fd Coy 1942-45. Architect; of Bondi, NSW; b. Sydney, 31 Jul 1913.

[7] Lt E. J. Johnston, MM, NX781. 2/1 Fd Coy and Water Tpt. Engine driver; of Waratah, NSW; b. Wallsend, NSW, 5 Oct 1903.

[8] The engineers collected working parties from the first groups of Italian prisoners and put them to work here with picks and shovels. An NCO whose name is unrecorded began this, probably unaware that it was a breach of the law. Later an officer ordered that they cease work.

[9] Maj M. C. Kennedy, NX132; 2/1 Bn. Student; of Maitland, NSW; b. Shipton Bellinger, Hants, Eng, 24 Feb 1918.

[1] Capt W. H. Travers, NX57; 2/1 Bn. Salesman; of Sydney; b. Sydney, 9 Nov 1915. (Grandson of Maj-Gen William Holmes, 1st AIF.)

About forty-five prisoners were taken. Kennedy advanced and took Post 49, with about forty prisoners.

In less than half an hour and while it was still dark MacPherson, who, though wounded, continued to lead his platoon, had taken 46 and 48. About this time a heavy and accurate Italian barrage began to fall along the broken wire, raising a haze of dust. Dillon sent Travers and his platoon forward to take an artillery position enclosed in a sangar close behind the concrete posts, which they did. Meanwhile Moriarty's company had taken Posts 45 and 44; the Italian line was breached.

The two remaining companies of the 2/1st were next through the gaps in the wire. In extended order, five or six yards between each man, they advanced up the slope behind the Italian posts. After a few hundred yards they came under fire from positions ahead of them, but they plodded on, firing from the hip at a long low stone wall from which heavy but inaccurate fire was coming. The men were spread across 600 yards and, in the dim light, offered a poor target. The Italians behind the wall fought until the leading Australians were inside it throwing grenades and lunging with the bayonet. When the mêlée was over, 400 prisoners were assembled and sent back.

Meanwhile the engineers had broken down the sides of the ditch on each side of Post 47 and made six crossings for the tanks and trucks at 60 to 100 yard intervals, and had discovered mines between the crossings and the wire. In five minutes two crossings were ready, and at 6.35 a.m. in the half-light the 7th Royal Tanks (with twenty-three tanks) and the 2/2nd moved towards the gap. As the infantrymen marched forward they sang and smoked.[2]

After passing through the gaps in the wire about 7 a.m. the columns swung right with tanks leading. Captain Caldwell's[3] company followed one troop of three tanks along the inside of the wire against the two lines of Italian posts, Captain Godbold's[4] with another troop of tanks marched against the battery positions farther in. In the first few posts the Italians fought it out, their tracer shells striking the heavy armour of the tanks and ricochetting high into the air. Some garrisons surrendered after the tanks, blazing with 2-pounders and machine-guns, had circled them, but generally there was a sharp little battle, sometimes for a quarter of an hour. Two or three of the cumbrous tanks would concentrate their fire on one post while a platoon fired with rifle and Bren from close behind. When the

[2] Several war correspondents stated that the Australians as they advanced at Bardia sang *The Wizard of Oz*, from a recent fairy-tale film of that name. The story has been repeated in many writings since then. The truth appears to be that, while the men of the 2/2 Bn were moving forward from the start-line after the barrage had begun, making silence no longer necessary, a sergeant set some of the troops singing *South of the Border*, which was probably the most popular song in both Australian and British Armies in 1940 and 1941. Later that day, when a group of Fleet Street war correspondents arrived they were conducted to Capt P. J. Woodhill (2/2 Bn) who mentioned that the men had sung as they advanced. "What did they sing?" asked one correspondent. Woodhill, who had a puckish sense of humour, and was very weary, searched his mind for the most incongruous song he could think of and replied, *"The Wizard of Oz"*. In an advance in open order, with the din of the bombardment drowning men's voices only small groups could hear one another singing.

[3] Lt-Col W. B. Caldwell, DSO, MC, NX92. 2/2 Bn and CO 14/32 Bn 1942-45. Cadet-valuer; of Homebush, NSW; b. Croydon, NSW, 26 Mar 1914.

[4] Capt G. H. Godbold, NX216; 2/2 Bn. Newsagent-ironworker; of West Maitland, NSW; b. West Maitland, 23 Jan 1913.

Italian fire seemed to have been subdued the infantrymen moved forward, sometimes cautiously, sometimes with a rush, and threw grenades into the concrete-sided gun-pits and down the entrances to the underground shelters. The inner and outer line of posts were about 400 yards apart and consequently the leading platoons were widely extended. In the dust and smoke the men were at times leading the tanks, at times well behind them. Precise control was often impossible. One post would be taken by a concerted attack and according to the book; and another single-handed by some impetuous man who worked forward alone and bombed a post into surrender. One section, having moved forward cautiously, threw a grenade into a post. An Australian voice from below shouted: "For God's sake don't do that; I'm here." It was Sergeant Skerrett,[5] an intrepid young leader, who had seized the place unaided. Between Posts 38 and 39 the leading men were fired on by four field guns at a range of a few hundred yards. Covered by the fire of two riflemen, Caldwell and Signalman Webb[6] advanced on Post 38, which surrendered.

Because his two leading companies were so far apart Lieut-Colonel Chilton[7] ordered Captain Hendry's[8] to fill the gap, where it soon came under direct fire from the Italian batteries and began to lose men, but pressed on without tanks, the sections widely dispersed. It was a wise decision by this resolute and always-thoughtful young leader, because the guns commanded the gap in the enemy's defences and might have caused grave losses among the troops following the leading battalions. Hendry and his men carried out their orders doggedly, undeterred by mounting casualties inflicted by Italian gunners who fought until the infantry were within 100 yards or less and sometimes until crews lay dead round the battery positions. As Hendry neared the objective the main part of his company, reduced by casualties and because sections had been placed out on the flanks, numbered only twenty men. Two of his platoon commanders had been killed and the third wounded. The remnant now came under fire from eight field guns, some 500 yards beyond the road. About the same time Godbold's company, moving parallel to Hendry's and also spread over a wide front, came under artillery fire from the same area. After an exchange of fire the commander of the tank troop regretfully informed Godbold that his petrol and ammunition were exhausted and he must return to the tanks' rallying point. Godbold halted his line for three-quarters of an hour, then decided to advance without waiting for the tanks' return. His Bren gunners silenced a battery firing on them from a position near the Iponticelli junction and they reached the objective there.

"I have a vivid recollection," wrote an infantry sergeant later, "of seeing ourselves as the enemy might have seen us. Just at sunset on the 3rd one

[5] Lt C. J. Skerrett, NX1761; 2/2 Bn. Grazier; of Tamworth, NSW; b. Sydney, 17 Oct 1914.

[6] Pte E. R. A. Webb, MM, NX1576; 2/2 Bn. Postmaster; of Lansdowne, NSW; b. Maclean, NSW, 1 Nov 1917.

[7] Brig F. O. Chilton, DSO, NX231. CO 2/2 Bn 1940-41; GSO1 NG Force 1942; Comd 18 Bde 1943-45. Solicitor; of Warrawee, NSW; b. Sydney, 23 Jul 1905.

[8] Lt-Col J. G. Hendry, MC, NX256. 2/2 and 2/32 Bns and CO 2/28 Bn 1945. School teacher and law student; of Strathfield, NSW; b. Coonabarabran, NSW, 3 Jul 1913. Died Borneo 1945.

of the Northumberland Fusiliers—a section was with us—called: 'Christ! look at this!' I looked around to see, almost silhouetted against the setting sun, a whole plain full of advancing infantry. The half light, the mass of equipment and the flapping greatcoat of every man, made them look really huge, while the perfect formation and dispersal, the steady advance, gave the impression of great numbers and of inevitability. It was merely one company of the 2/2nd Battalion, moving up towards us, but it was enough to impress even a man from the Northumberland, and it is possible that other sights such as this had, earlier, made an even greater impression on the Italians."

The gap in the line of Italian posts now extended from the Bardia-Capuzzo road on the right to the southern edge of the Wadi Gerfan on the left, and, in addition to the crossings over the ditch and the gaps in the wire at Post 47, a second series had been made by the engineers at Posts 38 and 39. Here Lieutenant Cantelo[9] had cut wire and disarmed mines while the posts were still untaken. Cantelo and three sappers were wounded but, as he lay, he continued to direct Sergeant Crawford[1] and the section and, after resting awhile, led them on to Posts 35 and 31, where other crossings were made. Finally this party opened the Bardia road by removing a road-block.[2]

Meanwhile, the right company of the 2/1st and the whole of the 2/3rd had thrust eastward into the fortress area. On the 2/1st's front Sergeant McIntosh,[3] a rugged, taciturn Scot—a British soldier of 1914-18—took one of Hodge's[4] platoons forward at about 10.30 a.m. to attack a battery that could be seen on the edge of the Gerfan escarpment, 400 yards away. Hidden by the dust raised by shells and movement, McIntosh was thirty yards from the Italian positions—a scattered group of guns each protected by a rough stone wall about four feet in height—before the Italians saw him. They began to fire, but McIntosh led his twenty-four men fast, shooting as they went, took the nearest gun position, and thence fired on the others. After an exchange of fire the Australians jumped from the sangar and charged towards the remaining guns. The Italians began waving white flags. McIntosh found in the area three field guns, an anti-tank gun and twelve machine-guns, and assembled 104 prisoners, not including some fifty who were lying dead or wounded. While he was reorganising his sections an Italian medical officer arrived and they agreed that both Australian and Italian wounded should be carried by Italian bearers to an Italian dressing station near by. The unwounded prisoners streamed back towards the perimeter with one Australian as escort.

[9] Lt-Col W. S. Cantelo, MC, VX1367. OC 2/1 Fd Coy 1943. Mining engineer; of Melbourne; b. Geraldton, WA, 16 Feb 1911.

[1] Capt A. A. Crawford, MBE, MM, VX1305. 2/2 and 2/8 Fd Coys. City Works Superintendent; of Malvern, Vic; b. Perth, Scotland, 3 Jun 1908.

[2] Spr C. A. Leeworthy (of Bentleigh, Vic) distinguished himself at Posts 39 and 31.

[3] WO1 Ian J. McIntosh, MM, NX8940; 2/1 Bn. Carpenter; of Tamworth, NSW; b. Scotland 27 Mar 1897. (He, like other veterans, had stated on enlistment in 1939, that he was under 35 and omitted to mention that he had been awarded the Military Medal in the war of 1914-18. For his leadership at Bardia he was again awarded that decoration—not a "bar", as would have been done if it had been known that he already held the medal.)

[4] Maj J. H. Hodge, MC, NX75; 2/1 Bn. Insurance officer; of Long Jetty, NSW; b. Waverley, NSW, 20 Feb 1905.

The left company, now commanded by Captain Travers, was advancing north along the double line of posts. As it approached Post 51 it came under fire from a battery about 700 yards north-east of the post, whose garrison, evidently heartened by this support, maintained brisk machine-gun fire, and was held for about ten minutes. The situation was saved by the arrival of an infantry tank of the troop allotted to this battalion which lumbered towards the battery and silenced it. The infantrymen occupied the battery positions overlooking Posts 51 and 53. It was then about 7.15 a.m. and the leading companies of the 2/1st were along a front of about 1,500 yards on top of the escarpment leading down to the Wadi Gerfan, their left under fire from Posts 53 and 55; the garrison of Post 51 was inactive.

By the time the 2/3rd Battalion had moved through the gap in the Italian line at 7.50 a.m. the dust was so dense that some platoon commanders could not see the platoons on each side of them, and steered by compass. Already prisoners from left and right were streaming through the gap. Beyond the Italian posts the three leading companies of the 2/3rd fanned out and advanced along the flat to the edge of the Gerfan escarpment on the right of the 2/1st. Into the dust and machine-gun fire the thin line strode as fast as their burden of heavy clothing, weapons, ammunition and rations would allow, marching at ease with rifles slung on their shoulders. After a few hundred yards the right company (Major Abbot's[5]) met fire from a group of sangars 200 yards away. A platoon went to ground, and opened fire with their Bren guns until they could see the bullets chipping the tops of the stones, and the Italians beginning to wave white cloths; then they advanced and hustled the prisoners to the rear.

Near the objective the company encountered a larger sangar. Lieutenant Murchison[6] ordered his men to charge and himself sprinted forward, a revolver in each hand. A bullet hit one revolver but he ran on wringing one hand and brandishing a revolver in the other. As he neared the wall, he and those nearest him threw grenades, leaped on to the wall and into the sangar. The dust began to rise from a scrimmage in which some of the attackers used bayonets until the Italians had all surrendered. Thence the platoons advanced into the source of the Wadi Ghereidia until some hundreds of Italians had surrendered and been ordered *"Avanti"*—in this case to the Australian rear—and generally without a guard. McGregor's[7] company, next to the left, had taken 300 prisoners and lost only one man killed in crossing the flat. Moving into Ghereidia they found themselves in what was evidently a headquarters, housed in dozens of caves dug into the banks. Sergeant Smith[8] fired a shot through the ground sheet that covered one of these, and from it and other dugouts issued dozens of Italians waving white cloths.

[5] Lt-Col J. N. Abbot, DSO, NX59. 2/3 Bn and CO 26 Bn 1942-45. Accountant; of Marrickville, NSW; b. Auckland, NZ, 22 Mar 1906. Died 10 Nov 1960.

[6] Lt-Col A. C. Murchison, MC, NX326. 2/3 Bn and CO 2 NG Bn 1945. Bank official; of Rose Bay, NSW; b. Newcastle, NSW, 27 Oct 1917.

[7] Lt-Col W. R. McGregor, NX46. 2/3 Bn and CO 38 Bn 1942-44. Salesman; of Maroubra Junction, NSW; b. Aberdeen, Scot, 17 Jun 1908.

[8] WO2 W. R. H. Smith, NX7977; 2/3 Bn. Commercial traveller; of Beverley Hills, NSW; b. Redfern, NSW, 20 Mar 1914.

Farther left Captain Hutchison's[9] company had no casualties until in sight of an oval sangar 250 yards long with a wall four to six feet high, near the edge of the escarpment. Machine-guns fired from its bays and a look-out tower rose in the centre. As Hutchison arrived this fort was being fired on from the left by Captain Hodge's company of the 2/1st, and the Italians surrendered before Hutchison's men reached it. Beyond it, now in new territory, they encountered really heavy fire from another large sangar 200 yards ahead. Hutchison ordered one platoon to fire while the other two charged. They fired as they advanced. Private Blundell,[1] very young and excited, ran as fast as he could, jumped on the wall and stood thrusting with his bayonet at an Italian machine-gun team. Another Australian close behind kicked the heads below with his heavy boots. Hutchison himself and Sergeant Owers[2] quickly turned one machine-gun about and fired it at the Italians. They noticed that it was sighted at 1,000 metres, the Italians in their alarm having omitted to lower the range; other machine-guns were sighted at 800 metres. In a few minutes the garrison had all surrendered—about 560 men with many machine-guns of various types, two light guns and two small tanks which had been dug into the ground. Four men escorted the prisoners to the perimeter. By 9.20 a.m. all companies of this battalion were on their objectives and a little later were in touch with the 2/1st on the left and with Major Onslow's[3] thin line of machine-gun carriers extending along the high ground between the 2/3rd and 2/2nd.

These cavalrymen had gone into action with the 2/3rd, then wheeled to the right. Often hidden in dust stirred up by shell bursts and by the churning of their own tracks, they had advanced to where the road crosses the source of Wadi Ghereidia. There they were shelled from about a mile ahead, and took cover behind the embankment. One carrier had been hit in the advance, and another was now hit near the road, where for half an hour any movement brought down concentrated artillery fire. The cavalrymen blazed back with Bren guns and anti-tank rifles and, with the help of tanks, succeeded in silencing one Italian battery.

Then followed an episode in which, along the thinly-held line of the 2/3rd Battalion in the centre, so many small groups were involved in such rapid succession that it is difficult to establish the precise sequence of events.

Hutchison had placed a platoon in the captured sangar and the other two forward of it to right and left on a peninsula that juts out into the Wadi Gerfan. With him was Lieutenant Gerard's[4] platoon of the 2/1st.

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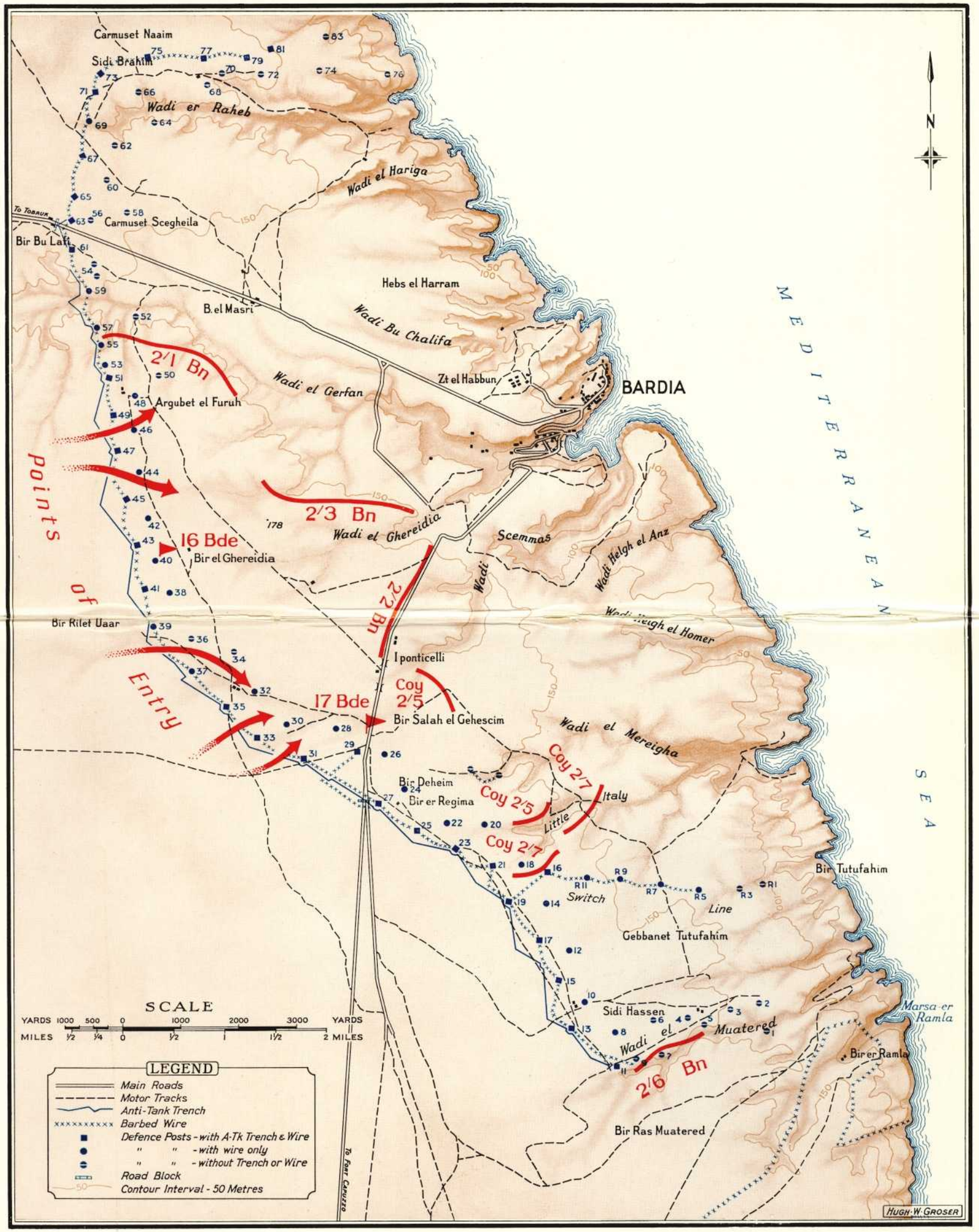
[9] Lt-Col I. Hutchison, DSO, MC, NX100. CO 2/3 Bn 1943-46, CO 3 Bn RAR Korea 1952. Shipping clerk; of Mosman, NSW; b. Sydney, 2 Aug 1913.

[1] L-Cpl N. Blundell, MM, NX4320; 2/3 Bn. Metal grinder; of Tempe, NSW; b. Paddington, NSW, 2 Mar 1918.

[2] Sgt L. N. Owers, NX4561; 2/3 Bn. Bread carter; of Bowral, NSW; b. Bredbo, NSW, 24 Dec 1915.

[3] Maj-Gen D. Macarthur-Onslow, CBE, DSO, NX135. 6 Cav Regt 1941-42; Comd 1 Armd Bde 1942-43, 4 Armd Bde 1943-45. Pastoralist; of Menangle, NSW; b. Poverty Bay, NZ, 5 Mar 1904.

[4] Lt E. H. Gerard, MC, NX7626; 2/1 Bn. Electrical mechanic; of Newtown, NSW; b. Glen Innes, NSW, 21 Jan 1918.



Position of leading companies, dusk 3rd January.

Hutchison was visiting his left forward platoon when he saw six tanks approaching. He noticed they were khaki not grey like the British tanks he had seen; but, assuming they were British, he shouted: "I'll be there in a minute." There was a burst of fire from the tanks which were now only thirty yards away. Hutchison's runner, Private Peter Tambakis,[5] fell mortally wounded, and a solid shell knocked Hutchison's rifle out of his hand. Private Hergenhan[6] ran forward to bomb one tank but the grenade caught in his jerkin and killed him. The tanks began to circle the sangar, firing at every sign of movement. Lieutenant Fulton[7] who had not realised what was happening was walking to the tanks, which he too believed to be British, when he realised his mistake. He ran forward, leaped on the tank, fired his pistol down the open turret and sprinted back into the sangar, hurdling the wall.

The tanks then moved south into the area of McGregor's company which was still holding a dense crowd of about 500 prisoners. These were being guarded by six men, and the company was dispersed over a wide area. The infantrymen guarding the prisoners had no weapons that could disable these tanks and took cover. The tanks moved among the prisoners and captured the guards, one of whom was sent to McGregor's headquarters 250 yards away to announce that all must surrender. The messenger met Le Nevez,[8] the company sergeant-major, who told him to forget his message. Le Nevez and Sergeant W. R. H. Smith, who was with him, fired on the tanks with a Bren gun, and they lumbered away. Le Nevez then fired a few bursts into the clustered Italians, who re-surrendered. Meanwhile Lieut-Colonel England,[9] moving along his forward positions in a carrier, had met Warrant-Officer MacDougal[1] of Hutchison's company who, seeing the tanks between him and the others, had taken his men to the right, putting a steep-sided little wadi between them and the tanks.

MacDougal told England what he had seen and that the tanks were moving south. England realised that this would take them through this thin line and to his headquarters which were established in a tributary of Gerfan not far away. Consequently he hastened back towards his headquarters. On his way he warned Sergeant Long[2] who hurried to two infantry tanks which were resting out of sight over the rise beyond the wadi, but the crews, either sceptical, or relaxed after the excitement of

[5] Pte P. Tambakis, NX4511; 2/3 Bn. Shop assistant; of Crookwell, NSW; b. Wagga Wagga, NSW, 8 Jun 1916. Killed in action 3 Jan 1941.

[6] Pte H. H. Hergenhan, NX4959; 2/3 Bn. Milk carter; of Newtown, NSW; b. Bega, NSW, 10 Oct 1916. Killed in action 3 Jan 1941.

[7] Capt I. C. Fulton, NX82; 2/3 Bn. Mechanical engineer; of Port Kembla, NSW; b. Sydney, 20 Feb 1912.

[8] WO2 R. Le Nevez, NX7965; 2/3 Bn. General carrier; of Annandale, NSW; b. Newcastle, NSW, 3 Dec 1911.

[9] Brig V. T. England, DSO, NX6. (1st AIF: 12 LH Regt.) CO 2/3 Bn 1939-41; Comd VDC in NSW 1942-45. Engineer; of Roseville, NSW; b. Sydney, 4 Jun 1894. Died 19 Sep 1951.

[1] Lt B. H. MacDougal, DCM, NX572; 2/3 Bn. Salesman; of Mosman, NSW; b. Mosman, 11 Apr 1915.

[2] Capt L. M. Long, MM, NX5383; 2/3 Bn. Station overseer; of "Brenda", Goodooga, NSW; b. Kew, Vic, 7 Dec 1909.

the long morning in action, did not respond.[3] Meanwhile England had reached his headquarters and ordered the few men there to form a line behind a low stone wall across the wadi. Soon the tanks appeared in the wadi travelling towards the wall, firing as they moved. Lieutenant Calman[4] and Corporal Wyatt[5] carried an anti-tank rifle along the bank of the wadi, and began firing on the tanks, but soon Calman was killed by their fire and the tanks advanced again. They were only forty yards from the riflemen lining the stone wall when into the wadi fifty yards behind the infantry drove the three trucks on which were mounted the 2-pounder guns of the anti-tank platoon attached to this battalion. A runner had warned Lieutenant Jay[6] of this platoon that Italian tanks were advancing. Corporal Pickett's[7] gun, the first to be ready for action, hit and silenced four of the tanks in quick succession. The gunner of the fifth then hit Pickett's portee (the truck carrying the gun) killing one man[8] and wounding Pickett, but the survivors got their gun into action and knocked out the tank. The sixth tank now hit Pickett's portee, this time setting it on fire and fatally wounding one of the team,[9] but this tank too was soon hit. None of the Italians survived the fire of the 2-pounder guns whose solid shells drove easily through their armour, but lacking enough momentum to pierce the opposite side ricochetted inside the cabin doing ghastly damage.

It was now half an hour after midday. By this time an apparently endless column of Italian prisoners was streaming back through the gaps in the perimeter; the officers in ornate uniforms with batmen beside them carrying their suitcases; the men generally dejected and untidy, strangely small beside their captors. When the 2/5th Battalion, marching into the perimeter, saw this column moving towards them, their first thought was that the 16th Brigade was being driven back—then came the realisation that the close-packed column, winding like a serpent over the flat country, was a sample of a defeated Italian army. Few guards now marched beside the prisoners—the battalions had found that to send even two or three men with as many hundred prisoners soon robbed them of more riflemen

[3] Men in the ranks wrote afterwards of their concern at the way in which the tension suddenly relaxed as soon as the first thrust into the enemy's fortress had been successfully completed, and of the difficulty junior leaders sometimes had in persuading men that the battle was not yet over. "My sense of the seriousness of it all was a little shocked by the levity shown at slack times," wrote a cavalry trooper. "Of course I was wrong, but I was one who thought then that it might not be a good initiation, and that our chaps might develop the bad habit of taking the other side too lightly—not in the attack, but in the subsequent mopping-up. I thought there was too much looting of weapon pits and dugouts which might have resulted in our men being taken off their guard. But I never saw any serious looting of towns or villages, or of civilians generally, and certainly no wanton destruction of enemy equipment."

[4] Lt L. D. Calman, NX89; 2/3 Bn. Metal worker; of Roseville, NSW; b. Elsternwick, Vic, 3 Oct 1914. Killed in action 3 Jan 1941.

[5] Sgt A. J. Wyatt, MM, NX4211; 2/3 Bn. Rigger; of Kogarah, NSW; b. Mt Magnet, WA, 19 Nov 1908.

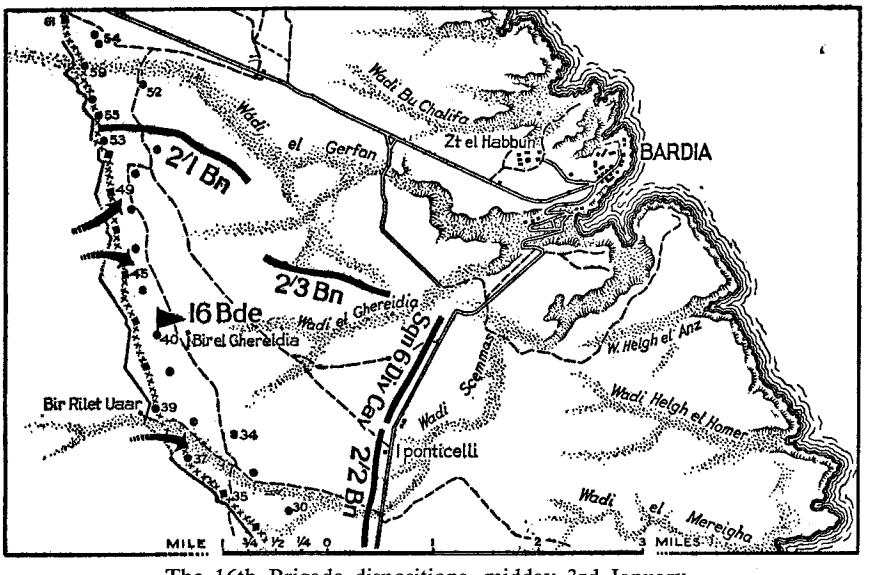
[6] Lt E. Jay, NX399. (1st AIF: 55 Siege Bty 1917-19.) 2/3 Bn. Town Clerk; of Canterbury, NSW; b. Sydney, 16 Sep 1896. Died of illness 2 Jun 1941.

[7] Sgt A. A. Pickett, DCM, NX4293. 2/3 Bn and 16 AT Coy. Painter; of Arncliffe, NSW; b. Annandale, NSW, 26 Dec 1912.

[8] Pte W. J. Dawes, NX5409; 16 AT Coy. Station hand; of Dubbo, NSW; b. London, 4 Apr 1919. Killed in action 3 Jan 1941.

[9] Pte E. W. Grant, NX4986; 16 AT Coy. Of Newtown, NSW; b. Redfern, NSW, 1 Jan 1918. Killed in action 3 Jan 1941.

than they could spare.[1] Already the forward battalions were learning that the numerical strength of the garrison had been greatly under-estimated. In the course of the morning an Italian medical officer told one of Allen's staff that there were 40,000 Italians in Bardia, not 25,000 as the Intelligence officers of XIII Corps and 6th Division had decided.[2]



The 16th Brigade dispositions, midday 3rd January.

The 2/5th Battalion, now advancing into the fortress area against this tide of Italian prisoners, had begun its move to the start-line at 12.30 p.m. on the previous day, when it began to shuttle forward in its own first-line transport assisted by some lent by the 2/7th and the Northumberland Fusiliers—but not enough to lift the whole battalion at once. It had to assemble at a rendezvous about three miles south of the corridor along which the 16th Brigade was to enter the perimeter. The track had been crowded with other trucks and with guns, and the fifteen mile journey took nine hours. After a conference at which final instructions were given to his officers, the commanding officer, Major Wrigley,[3] returned to Savige's headquarters to report that his battalion was at the rendezvous and to receive final instructions. During his absence the senior officer with

[1] By midday an estimated 6,000 prisoners had reached the provosts at their collecting post near Post 45, and been sent thence to a "cage" prepared on the Capuzzo-Salum road on the boundary wire.

[2] However, knowledge of the size of the Italian force seeped back very slowly to divisional and corps headquarters. Despite what the staff of 16 Bde had been told Brig Harding telephoned Berryman, about midday on the 4th, querying a recent message from Australian headquarters that 30,000 prisoners had already been captured. Berryman, who was equally surprised, sharply questioned Capt R. R. Vial (of Camberwell, Vic), his Intelligence officer, but was convinced by Vial's figures.

[3] Brig H. Wrigley, CBE, MC, VX171. (1st AIF: S-Sgt 3 Inf Bde, Capt 60 Bn; Ind Army 1917-24.) CO 2/5 Bn Dec 1940-41, 2/6 Bn 1941-42; Comd 20 Bde Sep-Oct 1942, 1 Base Sub-Area 1944-45. Oil company representative; of Sale, Vic; b. Scarsdale, Vic, 1 Dec 1891.

the battalion, Major Sell,[4] received instructions to move the unit about two miles and a half north to a final rendezvous for the night. When Wrigley returned at midnight he found that one half of the battalion had become separated from the other in the darkness. With his Intelligence officer, Lieutenant Shave,[5] he found the missing companies. Thence, after little more than two hours of rest the battalion moved to the assembly area where they were due not before 6 a.m. on the 3rd, after the 2/3rd Battalion had vacated it. Skilfully guided by Shave they marched through the second gateway into the defended area, near Post 39, and thence, in box formation and undeterred by the severe artillery fire, to near Post 36, where, still under fire aimed at the gap, they took shelter while awaiting their zero hour—11.30. Meanwhile Green's[6] company of the 2/7th, which was to come under Wrigley's command and form the right flank of his attack, also had entered the fortress area by still more southerly crossings near Post 35. All companies were under fire from the guns just east of the Bardia road which, it will be recalled, had been shelling the 2/2nd Battalion.

At this stage the 2/5th, whose men were already wearied by an almost sleepless night and two long marches, suffered a series of mishaps. Wrigley was wounded by shell fire at 10.20 and Sell took command. The commander of the supporting troop of tanks arrived twenty-five minutes after Wrigley had been wounded, and reported to Sell that he would have to go back for fuel and ammunition and could not return in time to join the battalion at 11.30. Sell immediately decided to go in without them.

The final plan for this phase of the attack provided that Captain Green's company of the 2/7th, leading on the right, with Major Starr's[7] company of the 2/5th advancing on his left rear, would capture Posts 27 to 10; Captain Smith's[8] company of the 2/5th with Captain Griffiths'[9] company of the same battalion echeloned to its right rear would advance with tanks to "The Triangle" where Smith would remain while the tanks picked up Griffiths and led him along the Switch Line.

When Smith's company moved out of the wadi on to the bare ground on the eastern side, it immediately met heavy and accurate fire from field guns and machine-guns in a semi-circle of enemy positions about 700 yards to the north-east. The infantrymen could see twelve guns blazing at them over open sights. Lieutenant McNally's[1] platoon on the right advanced some distance through this fire, then went to ground and, crawling forward, eventually came into touch with some men of Green's

[4] Lt-Col G. E. Sell, VX160; 2/5 Bn. Journalist; of South Yarra, Vic; b. Coonoor, Sth India, 11 Sep 1907. (Wrigley had taken command of the 2/5 only twelve days before. The second-in-command, Maj S. H. W. C. Porter, was ill. Sell was a company commander.)

[5] Lt-Col L. K. Shave, OBE, VX161. 2/5 Bn; GSO3 (Int) 9 Div 1941; GSO1 (Int) First Army 1944-45. Importer and manufacturer; of Camberwell, Vic; b. Mentone, Vic, 28 Sep 1916.

[6] Capt D. I. A. Green, VX170; 2/7 Bn. Bank assistant; of Sale, Vic; b. Morwell, Vic, 27 Aug 1911. Killed in action 3 Jan 1941.

[7] Lt-Col P. D. S. Starr, VX46. CO 2/5 Bn 1942-43, 58/59 Bn 1943. Bank clerk; of Williamstown, Vic; b. Townsville, Qld, 20 Mar 1910.

[8] Capt C. H. Smith, VX118; 2/5 Bn. Farmer; of Bacchus Marsh, Vic; b. Kalgoorlie, WA, 7 Mar 1910. Died of wounds 16 Jan 1941.

[9] Lt-Col W. B. Griffiths, MC, VX47; 2/5 Bn. Architect; of Toorak, Vic; b. Toorak, 5 Sep 1907.

[1] Capt J. McNally, VX3361; 2/5 Bn. Science student; of Kew, Vic; b. Sydney, 13 Jun 1918.

company (of the 2/7th) which was attacking on McNally's right and also under Sell's command. The platoons in the centre and left, however, and Smith's headquarters, lost every officer and many men soon after they left the protection of the wadi. Lieutenant Laing[2] was killed and Lieutenant Unkles[3] wounded; and in a few minutes about half the men had been hit. Sergeant Symington,[4] a veteran who had served as an officer with the N.Z.E.F. in the war of 1914-18, was seriously wounded, yet he crawled in front of Smith to protect him and insisted that Smith rest a Bren gun on his body to fire it. While lying there, the gallant Symington was hit again and killed and Smith was wounded.[5] Thus, in a few minutes, all the officers except McNally, and all the senior N.C.O's, were out of action.

Captain Balcombe Griffiths' company emerged from the wadi into this deadly fire as soon as the leading company had advanced 150 yards. In the first rush this company lost eighteen men including one officer, Lieutenant MacFarlane,[6] and was pinned down on the flat plain, the leading sections lying side by side with the survivors of Smith's company. Seeing that to advance farther across the open could lead only to the loss of what was left of the two companies, Griffiths, a cool and able tactician, who was with his leading platoon, decided to withdraw his men to the wadi, attack along it, capture the guns and thus enable Smith to continue the advance. He ordered each platoon in turn to trickle back in twos and threes across the shell-swept plain into the wadi; Lieutenant Bradley's[7] platoon, which was forward, to come in last with the company commander and his headquarters. This policy succeeded, and there were no casualties during the retirement. Having observed this withdrawal McNally also brought the survivors of his platoon into the wadi, where he learnt how greatly the company had suffered and that he was the only officer remaining.[8]

In the wadi Griffiths found a detachment of 3-inch mortars under Sergeant Lawson Wilson[9] and a platoon of machine-gunners of the Northumberland Fusiliers. He ordered them to engage the Italian guns. The Fusiliers put their guns into action as if on the parade ground with a speed, determination and nonchalance which greatly impressed the Australians. Their range-taker gave the range—800 yards—to the mortar-

[2] Lt J. A. Laing, VX151; 2/5 Bn. Clerk; of Hawthorn, Vic; b. Melbourne, 4 Jun 1919. Killed in action 3 Jan 1941.

[3] Capt R. T. Unkles, VX121; 2/5 Bn. Solicitor; of Sale and Parkville, Vic; b. Dandenong, Vic, 31 Jul 1911.

[4] Sgt W. Symington Brown, MC, MM (served as William Symington), VX8452; 2/5 Bn. Commercial traveller; of Melbourne, Vic; b. Darjeeling, India, 9 Sep 1894. Killed in action 3 Jan 1941.

[5] Smith was wounded again, and mortally, when an Italian shell hit a stone hut in the wadi in which he and other wounded men were being cared for. Another experienced leader, WO Barry Seymour, the CSM, had been killed by a shell in the assembly area before the advance to the start-line. (Seymour, who belonged to Kensington, Vic, served in the Aust artillery during 1914-18, when he gained the MM.)

[6] Maj R. H. MacFarlane, VX5338; 2/5 Bn. Bank officer; of Deniliquin, NSW; b. Thursday I, Qld, 28 May 1917.

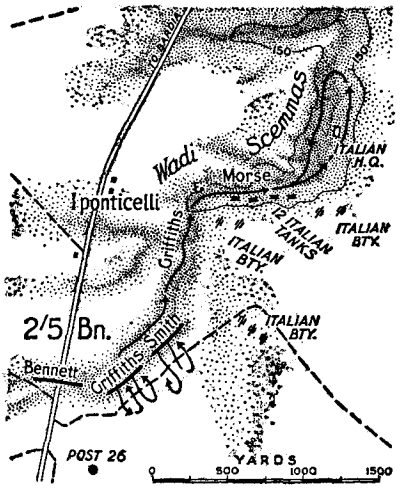
[7] Capt H. A. Bradley, VX3364; 2/5 Bn. Buyer-salesman; of Camberwell, Vic; b. Malvern, Vic, 8 Jan 1917.

[8] The company lost 9 killed or died of wounds and 19 wounded.

[9] Sgt L. Wilson, MM, VX3714; 2/5 Bn. Law clerk; of Williamstown, Vic; b. Cumberland, Eng, 17 Aug 1904.

men of the 2/5th. Wilson went up on to the bank of the wadi where, kneeling in full view of the enemy, he gave his men targets, and his mortars and the British machine-guns began systematically to silence one Italian gun after another.

During this bombardment Griffiths sent Lieutenant Bradley's platoon down the wadi to outflank the guns. News of the failure of the advance had now reached battalion headquarters. Lieutenant Shave joined Griffiths and was wounded. Then Sell came forward. Griffiths told him what he had done and that he proposed to follow Bradley and attack along the wadi. To this Sell agreed. As he moved along the wadi, Griffiths picked up Sergeant Morse[1] of the battalion's reserve company which was now moving into the wadi. Together they reached the foremost section of Bradley's platoon, well on the flank of the Italian gunners, some of whom were now waving white flags. About sixty Italians came over and gave themselves up. Griffiths then saw a battery of four guns farther along the wadi, on the western bank. He went forward with Morse to reconnoitre. After having taken cover for some minutes from a prolonged concentration of mortar fire, he sent Morse back for a few men. Morse soon arrived with Corporal Shattock[2] and his section, who rushed the guns and took the surrender of 100 more Italians. The remainder of the platoon then advanced along the wadi. The shell of the Italian defence round the Scemmas had been cracked and the twenty or so infantrymen were deep among the Italian artillery positions. They acknowledged the surrender, first of an Italian medical post, then of an anti-aircraft battery of four guns. On the eastern bank, round a sharp bend, four field guns were found. Corporal Cameron's[3] section moved forward and fired a few bursts from the rear, whereupon about forty Italian gunners surrendered.



Thenceforward pickets of two men each were posted along the wadi to usher back the prisoners who now outnumbered the Australians ten to one. Round the next bend in the wadi the infantrymen came face to face with a line of four or five stationary two-man tanks, all unmanned though two had their engines running. Before they could be manned, the Bren

[1] Sgt W. T. Morse, DCM, VX3680; 2/5 Bn. Labourer; of Melbourne; b. West Melbourne, 3 Feb 1905.

[2] Sgt R. H. Shattock, MM, VX5233; 2/5 Bn. Dairyman; of Cohuna, Vic; b. Ballarat, Vic, 31 Aug 1905. Killed in action 9 Jul 1943.

[3] Cpl H. McD. Cameron, VX5308; 2/5 Bn. Labourer; of Bendigo, Vic; b. Foress, Morayshire, Scot, 19 Jul 1904.

gunners had sent a burst among them and about 200 Italians surrendered. Beyond the next turn the floor of the wadi fell steeply away, forming an amphitheatre about seventy-five feet deep with almost precipitous sides. At first there were no signs of life but, when Morse fired a shot into the pit, about seventy Italians, including twenty-five well-dressed officers, began to appear at the openings of a dozen caves and dugouts waving white flags. It was the headquarters of an artillery group, where the staff had been living in complete security against shell fire from the landward side and in considerable luxury. There were enamelled baths, silken garments and cosmetics. The notepaper in the offices was embossed and the glasses in the messes were engraved.

Leaving Morse in command, Griffiths returned to Sell's headquarters, driving an Italian car, to report what had happened. It was then 1.30 p.m. Soon after the departure of Griffiths, Morse saw some heads behind a wall 500 yards farther along the wadi. Taking one man with him he advanced firing and shouting to the Italians to surrender. The Italians obeyed and the two men here collected another 200 prisoners whom they shepherded along the wadi. Fire from his own artillery now began to fall along the wadi whereupon Morse, leaving the prisoners to move along the exposed eastern bank, withdrew his own men down the opposite bank to the captured Italian headquarters whence the long stream of prisoners straggled back along the Scemmas.

When he heard of the initial setback to the 2/5th Brigadier Savige, commanding the southern brigade, had sent his brigade major, Brock,[4] forward to help to reorganise the attack. Brock arrived about 1 p.m. as Griffiths was advancing to capture the guns. He found the three forward companies of the 2/5th withdrawn to the Scemmas and the left flank open and overlooked by the enemy. The supporting artillery barrage had now moved a considerable distance ahead, according to plan, and was no longer masking the Italian guns immediately ahead, the companies were somewhat mixed, and the confusion was being increased by the presence of perhaps 3,000 Italian prisoners in the wadi. Brock brought forward Captain Savige's[5] company of the 2/7th Battalion, which was in reserve, and directed it to the Triangle—originally Smith's objective; later he intercepted two tanks which had now arrived and ordered them to accompanying Savige. Griffiths with some twenty men was directed to Twin Wadis on the near side of Little Italy. Later the remaining company of the 2/5th occupied the road angle east of Iponticelli.

Meanwhile, undeterred by the setback on the left, Green's company had been steadily advancing. It had formed up on the Bardia road ready to advance with the 2/5th at 11.30 a.m. when Green learnt that tanks would not be available to support him. As his men waited for the advance to begin they came under fire from the Italian batteries that were to stop

[4] Lt-Col G. H. Brock, DSO, VX22. BM 17 Bde and CO 31/51 Bn. Insurance official; of Camberwell, Vic; b. Box Hill, Vic, 11 Oct 1907. Died of illness 19 Dec 1943.

[5] Capt J. R. Savige, MC, VX20303; 2/7 Bn. Farmer; of Moe, Vic; b. Moe, 25 Jul 1908.

the companies on the left, and Green sent Lieutenant Evensen's[6] platoon forward on to a spur to try to subdue these guns while the rest of his company advanced against the perimeter posts. Evensen was wounded there.[7] Meanwhile Lieutenant Davis'[8] platoon attacked and took Post 27, Davis and others being wounded. Green's plan was to advance on a two-platoon front, the inner platoon taking the posts along the inner line and the outer platoon the posts along the outer line. The flat ground was swept with machine-gun fire and by shells "skidding knee high", as one of the infantrymen described them, but the men were well dispersed with twenty yards between each, and casualties were consequently so low that here, as elsewhere, some Italians, puzzled by the way in which the Australians kept moving forward through such fire, were convinced that their shining leather jerkins were bullet-proof. At each post the Italian fire was subdued with Bren and rifle; the thin line of attackers then moved forward; and when the leaders were close enough to begin lobbing grenades round the machine-gun pits the Italians surrendered.

After Post 24 had been taken two tanks arrived and, though his fuel and ammunition were nearly exhausted, their commander said that he would accompany the infantry. These were the tanks which Brock had directed to join Savige's company; in error they joined Green's. Post 22 was then taken (a command post manned by twenty to thirty troops). Lieutenant Webb,[9] the third platoon commander, was wounded there, leaving only two officers—Green and his second-in-command, a slender, fair lieutenant named Macfarlane.[1] As these two stood watching some of the prisoners being rounded up an Italian bobbed up from one of the pits, put a rifle to his shoulder and shot Green through the chest. He then dropped his rifle, put up his hands and climbed out of the post, smiling broadly. An angry Australian threw him back into the post and emptied his Bren gun into him. At the same time others demanded of Macfarlane that they should be allowed to bayonet all the other prisoners, but Macfarlane—now the only officer in the company—forbade them to take revenge, and was obeyed.

The Italians in Post 25, on the skyline 500 yards away, having witnessed this incident, sent out an emissary who could speak English and surrendered without firing another shot. Macfarlane kept him as an interpreter. Sergeant Foxwell's[2] platoon took Post 23. By the time Post 20 had been reached—about 3 p.m.—one tank had returned to refuel and the second had shed a track and could not move. Macfarlane's company—

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[6] Capt S. B. Evensen, VX5629; 2/7 Bn. Farmer; of Castlemaine, Vic; b. Geraldton, WA, 23 Oct 1905.

[7] He was carried to shelter under fire by L-Cpl T. M. Fennessy (of St Kilda, Vic).

[8] Lt C. A. Davis, VX4603; 2/7 Bn. Hospital secretary; of Wentworth, NSW; b. North Adelaide, 14 Apr 1909.

[9] Lt F. C. Webb, VX9493; 2/7 Bn. Manual worker; of Melbourne, Vic; b. Albert Park, Vic, 3 Dec 1911.

[1] Maj C. W. Macfarlane, MC, VX5545. 2/7 and 37/52 Bns; NG Inf Bn 1944-45. Commercial traveller; of Glen Iris, Vic; b. Gardiner, Vic, 13 Jul 1914.

[2] Lt W. S. Foxwell, MM, VX5489; 2/7 Bn. Storekeeper; of Montrose, Vic; b. Inman Valley, SA, 22 Sep 1904.



(Imperial War Museum photo)

The attack on Bardia. Sappers who had prepared the Italian anti-tank ditch for passage of vehicles watching a Bren gun carrier making the crossing.



Australians sheltering in an Italian anti-tank ditch during the battle of Bardia.

(Imperial War Museum photo)

what was left of it—now faced the Switch Line. Two Australians had been sent to the rear with each batch of prisoners from the first few posts, but later one rifleman was considered sufficient guard for fifty or sixty Italians. Even so Macfarlane's company had been so depleted by casualties and detachment of escorts, that it now consisted of himself and sixty-five men. However, this company with little aid from tanks and in about three hours had taken six posts and widened the breach in the Italian line by 2,000 yards.

Major Starr's company appeared on the left—the first friendly troops Macfarlane had seen since leaving the Bardia road more than two miles away. It was then about 4 p.m. Starr's company had made a relatively uneventful advance parallel with Macfarlane's. As they neared Little Italy Starr's men had rounded up some 200 prisoners. Both Starr and Macfarlane were now under heavy fire from Post 16; Macfarlane called his attacking platoon back to the protection of Post 18 which looked at 16 across a depression—the end of the heel of Little Italy—and sent his recently-acquired interpreter to 16 to demand its surrender. Watching through binoculars he saw the Italian go to the post and bend over it. Presently a figure half emerged from the post and shot him. Thereupon Macfarlane's men turned the Italian guns upon Post 16. Starr's company was now in the toe of Little Italy on Macfarlane's left.

The heel and leg of Little Italy had been reached by Captain Savige's company some time before. At 2.45 Savige, on Brock's orders, had begun his advance towards "The Triangle", 3,000 yards away. His men advanced in very open formation, using their automatic weapons as they moved. Before they had gone 1,000 yards they were under gruelling fire from field and machine-guns from left and front. The line moved on steadily with its trucks following, the fire becoming more accurate and intense the closer it approached. Lieutenant Timms[3] was fatally wounded. Two of the company's trucks, following across the bare country, were hit by shell fire. Then the Australians found themselves close to a group of Italian batteries protected by machine-gunners—part of the strong concentration of artillery in the southern sector. The infantrymen attacked, manoeuvring forward under the fire of Brens and rifles and, after a half-hour fight, had captured eight field guns and many light and medium machine-guns. Here the two remaining platoon commanders, Lieutenants Howard[4] and Arnold,[5] were wounded and fewer than half Savige's original ninety-six men were left with him. Three officers having been hit, Sergeants McDonald,[6] Hoban[7] and Corrie[8] stood out as leaders. Savige pressed on

[3] Lt B. H. Timms, VX8409; 2/7 Bn. Jackeroo; of Kew, Vic; b. Kew, 23 Jun 1914. Died of wounds 6 Jan 1941.

[4] Lt M. A. Howard, VX5424; 2/7 Bn. Jackeroo; of Darlington Point, NSW; b. St Budeaux, Cornwall, 13 Oct 1918.

[5] Capt E. Arnold, VX4621; 2/7 Bn. Of Mildura, Vic; b. Perth, WA, 30 Apr 1909.

[6] Lt A. J. McDonald, VX5554; 2/7 Bn. Butcher; of Box Hill, Vic; b. Fitzroy, Vic, 25 Sep 1919. Killed in action 3 Feb 1943.

[7] WO2 F. F. Hoban, VX4607; 2/7 Bn. Labourer; of Mildura, Vic; b. Inverness, Scot, 20 Nov 1904.

[8] Sgt N. H. Corrie, VX5564; 2/7 Bn. Farm worker; of Lilydale, Vic; b. Footscray, Vic, 8 Sep 1916.

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in cover of the wadi which leads eastward from The Triangle, taking the surrender of one machine-gun team after another, then of another four-gun battery. He was now deep in the enemy's artillery positions and had at least 2,000 prisoners, but only forty-five of his own men; consequently, after scouting forward for 400 yards with seven men, and capturing four more guns, he decided to halt and establish himself in the Little Italy wadi for the night. Thither the signallers laid a telephone line from battalion headquarters so that he was able to report his position, but it was not considered feasible to send vehicles forward under fire from the remaining Italian batteries to fetch his twenty-three[9] wounded. Thus Savige's company, like Macfarlane's, by a skilful and resolute advance maintained in spite of severe losses, had established itself on the objective.

On the right, however, neither Macfarlane nor Starr had been in communication with battalion headquarters during the afternoon, or knew the course of the battle since the repulse at the Wadi Scemmas. They planned a concerted attack on Post 16 at dawn, using captured weapons. About midnight, however, Major Marshall,[1] second-in-command of the 2/7th, arrived, to say that Brigadier Savige had ordered the Switch Line to be cleared as soon as possible.

It will be recalled that Savige's brigade was fighting in two widely-separated sectors, and that as soon as he had learnt of the setback to the 2/5th he had sent his brigade major to it to help in reorganisation. Later in the afternoon he sent his Intelligence officer, Lieutenant Schofield,[2] forward to his northern sector with orders that Lieut-Colonel Walker,[3] the trusted commander of the 2/7th, was to take command of all troops in the Switch Line area. Schofield returned from this task at 7.30 p.m. and reported on the situation of the northern battalions. Thereupon Savige, leaving his staff captain, Bishop,[4] at his headquarters to keep in touch with Godfrey, himself went forward to the 2/5th. There he found the situation "extremely confused; the attack was stagnant."[5]

Griffiths, with only 20 men, was unable to gain any contact with other of our troops and had been and was under heavy gun fire over open sights, MG and mortar fire (he wrote later). He therefore wisely decided to withdraw. Sell and his adjutant were feeling the effects of a particularly gruelling day and were unable to locate Starr. Savige was fighting guns firing over open sights and stoutly resisting machine-gunners and people serving mortars. He could be depended to hang on despite the fact he, too, had lost officers. Bennett[6] with A Coy 2/5 Bn, was at Road Angle. The gap in the left flank was extremely dangerous.

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[9] In addition four others had been killed. There was a medical orderly with each company to attend to the wounded men who could not be brought back immediately. In this company he was Pte A. K. Naismith (of Gunbower, Vic), who "did a marvellous job".

[1] Maj H. C. D. Marshall, DSO, VX34; 2/7 Bn. Asst office manager; of Canterbury, Vic; b. Shepparton, Vic, 16 Nov 1905.

[2] Lt-Col V. J. Schofield, MBE, VX5104. IO 17 Bde 1940-42; GSO2 (Liaison) II Corps 1943-44; GSO1 (Int) I Corps 1944-45. Mill worker; of Newtown, Vic; b. Geelong, Vic, 24 May 1917.

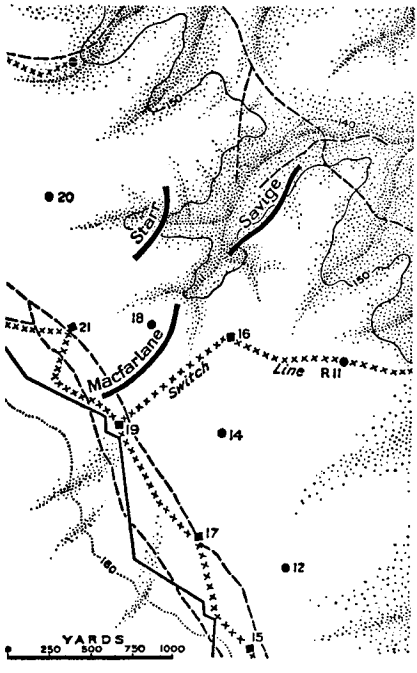
[3] Lt-Col T. G. Walker, DSO, VX32. CO 2/7 Bn 1939-41. Bank officer; of Hampton, Vic; b. Richmond, Vic, 14 Oct 1900.

[4] Maj-Gen J. A. Bishop, DSO, OBE, VX35. 2/7 Bn 1939-41; BM 17 Bde 1941; CO 2/27 Bn 1942 and GSO1 6 Div 1943-45 (Admin Comd 19 Bde Jun-Jul 1945). Department manager; of Box Hill and Hawthorn East, Vic; b. Malvern, Vic, 16 Jan 1908.

[5] Report on Action 17 Aust Inf Bde, Battle of Bardia.

[6] Lt-Col A. P. Bennett, VX137; 2/5 Bn. Solicitor; of Hawthorn, Vic; b. Hawthorn, 27 Feb 1909.

Savige now conferred with Walker and Sell. In obedience to the order conveyed by Schofield earlier in the afternoon to take over part of the area west of the Switch Line, Walker had gone forward, leaving instructions for the remainder of the battalion to be brought up. He had called at the 2/5th's headquarters and gone on to Post 20 whence he could see Macfarlane's men attacking Post 16 and, farther left, heavy fire and dust marking the whereabouts of Captain Savige's company. He decided that the best plan would be to use one of his two fresh companies—Halliday's[7]—on the posts of the outer perimeter and to build up strength on the left by directing Macfarlane to continue against the Switch Line and close the gap between himself and Savige. The Brigadier adopted this plan and gave comprehensive orders for reorganisation and the advance.



Halliday (D Coy 2/7 Bn) to push on through Macfarlane and fight his way southward during the night. Macfarlane was ordered to do likewise along the Switch Line. Starr 2/5 Bn who was thought to have his company about Post 20, was ordered to occupy Twin Wadis. A composite company from personnel of 2/5 Bn was organised and placed under command of Capt J. W. Duffy[8] and ordered to occupy [part of the Scemmas] send out a patrol and link up with 16 Aust Inf Bde. The area was divided into two sectors—Walker in command of forward sector, Sell in command of rear sector.[9]

The sector boundary was fixed—a more or less east-west line. Savige then established an advanced headquarters in the ditch by the Bardia road with a telephone line through Sell's headquarters to his main headquarters. His link with Walker was by liaison officer.

It was the above orders which Major Marshall carried forward to Halliday (who had arrived within the perimeter about dusk and whom Marshall reached about midnight), and to Macfarlane. In detail, the order to Halliday provided that he should open his attack at 12.30 a.m. and not push beyond Post 10. Halliday had met Macfarlane's company at Post 18 about 9 p.m. and taken up a position at Post 21.

In obedience to the new order Macfarlane advanced along the Switch. He gave Sergeant Foxwell the task of creeping up to Post 16 in the dark-

[7] Capt G. H. Halliday, MC, VX63; 2/7 Bn. Clerk; of Dandenong, Vic; b. Kaniva, Vic, 15 Dec 1909.

[8] Maj J. W. Duffy, VX71; 2/5 Bn. Bank officer; of Balwyn, Vic; b. Dublin, 31 May 1905.

[9] Report, 17 Aust Inf Bde.

ness, cutting gaps in the wire on the western side, and leading his men silently against the Italian garrison. Macfarlane himself with another platoon was to make a simultaneous attack while the third platoon remained outside the wire. As the attackers charged, a Bren gunner fired his weapon and gave the Italians warning, but before they had time for more than a few shots and grenades Macfarlane's men were over the entrances, dropping in grenades, jumping down into the concrete-lined pits and trenches, flashing torches (which they had taken from Italians earlier in the day) and demanding surrender. Employing the same tactics Macfarlane then went on and took R11, the second post along the Switch Line.

The company's only compass had been with Green, and Macfarlane now had none. However, having found a shallow "crawl trench" he deployed his men and began following it, as he believed, towards R9, but soon realised that he was going astray. He halted his men, very quietly for they could hear Italians speaking near by, and waited for dawn.

At dawn Macfarlane led his men to within 400 yards of Post R9 and organised an attack, but the fire from the now alert Italian post was too heavy. Private Jinnette[1] who had been in the forefront all through the battle went back under fire to Starr to ask for a 2-inch mortar. Starr sent this forward and, with its help, Macfarlane's handful of men attacked and took R9 from which emerged about forty prisoners. Shell fire was still coming from batteries only 300 to 600 yards away to the north-east and mortar fire from the next post along the Switch Line. Macfarlane's men took shelter with their prisoners in the anti-tank ditch and engaged the next post. From the eastern end of the post Corporal Taylor,[2] a high-spirited and courageous soldier, engaged in a twenty-minute duel with an Italian battery clearly visible about 300 yards away. Taylor was one of a number of first-rate rifle shots, mostly from the irrigation areas of north-western Victoria, who had joined the 2/7th. With his rifle he was hitting Italians as they ran from one sangar to another carrying shells to the gun. Eventually the Italians swung one gun off its more distant target and began firing at Taylor and those with him. One of their first shells hit the edge of the machine-gun post from which he was firing. Macfarlane anxiously hurried to the far end of the post where he saw "a big red-head shouldering off bits of concrete and saying with a giggle: 'See, the bastards don't like it'."

Sergeant "Joe" Solomon[3] and some others with Taylor tried without success to turn the abandoned Italian weapons against the next post whence an Italian machine-gun was firing accurately at R9. Solomon hit the man at the trigger of the Italian gun and was peering along his rifle

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[1] Sgt W. A. Jinnette, MM, VX5885; 2/7 Bn. Driver; of Dromana, Vic; b. Merino, Vic, 22 Sep 1911.

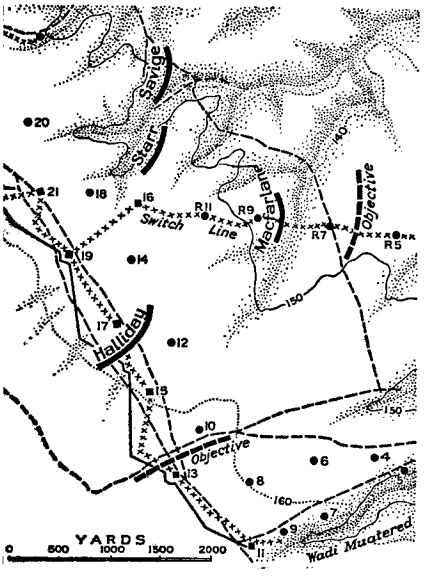
[2] WO2 D. R. Taylor, DCM, VX5449; 2/7 Bn. Labourer; of Melbourne; b. Aberdeen, Scot, 14 Aug 1907.

[3] Sgt J. Solomon, VX5859; 2/7 Bn. Shop assistant; of Trentham, Vic; b. Hobart, 29 Aug 1914. Killed in action 4 Jan 1941.

for the next gunner to appear when the gun reopened fire, killing Solomon instantly.[4]

While this fight was still in progress Macfarlane received the order to lie low because his own artillery was about to fire concentrations along the road which passed through the Switch Line near by.

Halliday's company on Macfarlane's right had set off about 1.30 a.m. His tactics at Post 19 were to send a few scouts forward from a covering platoon while his two remaining platoons worked their way to the opposite side of the post and attacked with fixed bayonets. In this style he took, at 2.30 a.m., Post 19 with 73 prisoners and, at 4 a.m., Post 14 with 64, for a loss of one man killed and 7 wounded, Lieutenant Bernard[5] being in the forefront in each of these encounters. Post 17 was on the alert and a prolonged fight took place; it was daylight before it was taken. Halliday now held 103 prisoners and his company was only 46 strong, parties having been sent back with prisoners. He decided he should not try to go farther without support. Thus, soon after dawn, Halliday was at Post 17, Macfarlane at R9 with Starr near by and Captain Savige in the Little Italy wadi farther north. Duffy had patrolled along the Scemmas to a point overlooking Bardia town.



Soon after dawn 4th January, forward companies, 2/5 and 2/7 Battalions.

The original plan had been perilously complicated; and, as a result partly of the failure of the tanks to appear on time, partly of the strong resistance of Italian gunners which had stopped the 2/5th's attack in its first few minutes, largely of lack of artillery support, the fight had not gone according to plan.[6] However, the courage of the men and the determination of young leaders (particularly Macfarlane, Savige and Griffiths) to carry on to the objective saved a situation that was causing anxiety at brigade and divisional headquarters; and in a short afternoon the survivors of the

[4] The previous day a shell splinter had split a grenade Solomon was carrying in his pocket without detonating it. "Look at this ——— grenade, 'Wadi' (Macfarlane's nickname); they'll never get me." That night at R11 an Italian grenade landed almost between his legs, but wounded him only slightly. Such escapes from ineffective Italian missiles were common. Macfarlane was twice blown over by Italian shells bursting four or five yards away but was not injured.

[5] Lt S. E. Bernard, MC, VX5100; 2/7 Bn. Regular soldier; of Geelong, Vic; b. Melbourne, 20 Jan 1914.

[6] Col Walker said later: "No artillery support was available during the attack east of the Bardia road. Had artillery support been available to the extent of even a battery the Switch Line could have been turned and the posts holding the 2/6 Bn taken from the rear on the 3rd, or, at the latest, at dawn on the 4th."

midday set-back had driven deep into the Italian artillery positions, captured at least sixty guns and some thousands of prisoners, seized 3,000 yards of the Italian perimeter, and (by the early hours of the second morning) had taken half of the Italian Switch Line. The six rifle companies that had been engaged had taken prisoners from the four infantry regiments that comprised the infantry of the *62nd* and *63rd Divisions*. And with little aid from the tanks which were to have led them into the attack, they had taken and passed the allotted objectives.[7]

It will be recalled that, while the 16th Brigade broke through the Italian perimeter in the early morning of the 3rd, Godfrey's 2/6th Battalion was to create a diversion seven miles away at the southern end of the perimeter. It now remains, before leaving the events of the first twenty-four hours on the left flank, to describe the fate of this "diversion", carried out in the area in which elaborate efforts had already been made to persuade the Italians that the main attack would fall. By aggressive patrolling the 2/6th had gained control of all the country up to the south bank of the Wadi Muatered along the top of whose north bank was a line of Italian posts similar to those round the remainder of the perimeter but somewhat closer together. To assault them an attacker would have to climb 150 to 200 feet down the steep southern side of the wadi, cut a path through the wire there and then climb the northern side. To command every part of the wadi, the Italians had established small sangars forward of and between the numbered posts.

Godfrey's orders to his companies were that, by 5.15 a.m., Captain Muhlhan's[8] company on the right, Captain Rowan's[9] in the centre and Little's on the left would move in darkness and (so far as Rowan's and Little's were concerned) under cover of the two tributary wadis which Savige had named after them to within 400 yards of the Muatered. The remaining company (Lieutenant Kerr[1]) would be in reserve. Fifteen minutes after the bombardment opened the two leading companies on the left would occupy the north bank from Posts 7 to 11 while Muhlhan's would establish itself on the right as far left as Post 3. One platoon (Lieutenant Sherlock's) was posted on the extreme right near the top of the cliffs leading down to the sea.

The plan of Captain Little, whose company was to take Post 11, was to send two platoons across the open ground on the right of Little Wadi, and thence across the Muatered to atttack the post from the right. Artillery fire was to shield them until they reached the Muatered. When it lifted, the fire of machine-gunners of the Northumberland Fusiliers was to beat

[7] They had taken the positions marked as the "infantry objectives". Beyond these, according to the plan, the tanks were to have advanced farther, each little column of tanks followed by a company of infantry.

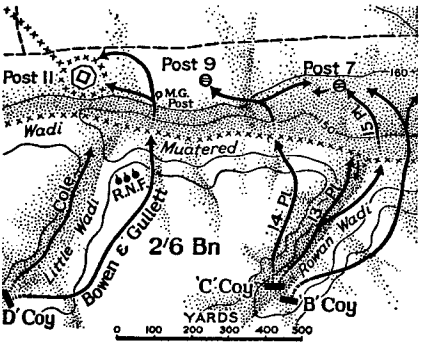
[8] Maj W. T. Muhlhan, VX152; 2/6 Bn. Printer; of North Brighton, Vic; b. Rushworth, Vic, 29 Mar 1910.

[9] Lt-Col J. G. Rowan, MC; VX157. 2/6 Bn and CO 37/52 Bn 1942-45. Farmer; of Colac, Vic; b. Colac, 26 Oct 1905.

[1] Maj I. E. Kerr, VX56. 2/6 Bn and OC 2/5 Cdo Sqn 1943-45. Bank officer; of Colac, Vic; b. Colac, 7 Jun 1918.

upon the post while the attackers reached the wire round it and fired a Very light—the signal for the machine-gun fire to cease—while the remaining platoon rushed the post from the front and the nearer platoons cut their way through the wire and attacked it from the left. By a last-minute decision Little posted the nine Bren guns of the company with the Fusiliers to thicken the barrage and thus the attackers went in with only rifles and grenades.[2]

When the attack opened the platoons on the right, commanded by Lieutenant Bowen[3] and Sergeant Gullett,[4] crossed the high ground, climbed down into the Wadi Muatered, cut gaps in the ten-foot-wide barbed-wire apron there, and clambered up the farther bank without a casualty, though Italian shell fire was now falling heavily along the wadi and tracer bullets were flying overhead at the Northumberland Fusiliers who were pouring fire at Post 11 from the southern bank. At the top of the far bank the attackers encountered a machine-gun post whose men were put out of action with one grenade. The two platoons, forty-three men all told, moved forward to the wire surrounding Post 11 and cut a passage, still without losing a man, though they were sure they could be seen and that the Italians were deliberately holding their fire. Bowen now fired his signal light and the men jumped to their feet and charged, moving as fast as they could and shouting. Bowen's platoon was on the left, Gullett's on the right. The trench that formed the outer edge of the Italian post was forty yards from the wire and the attackers had covered half this distance when fierce and sustained machine-gun and rifle fire opened from the post and grenades began to fall among the Australians. In a few seconds nearly all the attackers were thrown to the ground. Flares were lighting the area like daylight and there was no cover. On the extreme right Corporal Latham[5] and several men of his section reached the trench first; and on the extreme left Bowen reached it but was killed soon afterwards. Sergeant Millar[6] of his platoon organised a bayonet attack against Italians in sangars near by, but he, too, was killed (by an Italian who had just surrendered). Four who survived took shelter in a sangar where two hours later they were taken prisoner.



[2] This would not have been done in later battles after the value of the Bren fired from the hip in close fighting had been learnt.

[3] Lt J. S. Bowen, VX3935; 2/6 Bn. Farmer; of Melbourne; b. Melbourne, 3 Jan 1913. Killed in action 3 Jan 1941.

[4] Maj H. B. S. Gullett, MC, MP, VX3511; 2/6 Bn. Journalist; of Melbourne; b. London, 16 Dec 1914.

[5] Cpl B. A. F. Latham, VX4425; 2/6 Bn. Clerk; of Sandringham, Vic; b. Cookham, Bucks, Eng, 7 Feb 1920. Killed in action 3 Jan 1941.

[6] Sgt P. Millar, VX4429; 2/6 Bn. Grocer; of Elsternwick, Vic; b. Musselburgh, Scot, 6 Feb 1918. Killed in action 3 Jan 1941.

By this time several men had obtained a footing in parts of the trench, having torn up the loose planks that covered it and jumped in but, in the mêlée, nearly all were killed or wounded. Latham was wounded, mortally. Most of the fire was coming from machine-gun posts beyond the trench and near the centre of the post.

Gullett led three of the men who were still unhit—Sergeant Scott[7] and two brothers named Damm[8]—against each of these posts in turn and silenced the crews. On one sortie Gullett and Scott were knocked down by a grenade. As they lay Scott was hit again and killed and Gullett was hit twice and stunned. Eventually he struggled back to the part of the outer trench where Latham had first obtained a footing, and there found Corporal Maloney[9] and several others wounded but only one unwounded man—Private Brockley,[1] a driver who had left his post to join in the attack, because, he said, "he felt like a bludger sitting at battalion headquarters, and wanted to be in it."

It was now dawn and no sounds came from Bowen's end of the trench. One part of the Italian post—evidently an ammunition store—was on fire and the flames lit up the area brightly. It seemed that all Bowen's men were killed or wounded. Gullett ordered the others, of whom only three were now unwounded, to abandon him and go back, but Brockley lifted him and helped him along, while Bernie Damm carried on his back his brother, who had been hit in both legs. They had moved only a few yards among the rocks when the Italians began to cut them off, but Maloney, Brockley and Damm, with their rifles, kept them back. In one of these skirmishes Claudie Damm was hit again and killed. The survivors stumbled down into the wadi, under fire from Post 9. Some Italians ran out of this post to intercept them but Damm shot one dead and wounded another. In the wadi they were unable to find the gap through the wire, but cut a new one and lay among some bushes until mortars from their own lines began dropping bombs among the Italian weapon pits that overlooked them. This quietened the Italian fire and the four men climbed to the exposed top of the northern bank, where they spread out and ran for shelter. Here Gullett and Maloney were again hit, but Maloney was able to help Gullett to safety. Of the forty-eight men who had gone into the attack only these four returned that day.

While this fight was in progress the remaining platoon, Sergeant Cole's,[2] had taken up a position in the wadi fifty yards in front of the wire. There one man was killed and one wounded. Captain Kiddle[3] went forward,

[7] Sgt J. B. Scott, VX4547; 2/6 Bn. Gas service layer; of Moorabbin, Vic; b. Moorabbin, 15 Sep 1913. Killed in action 3 Jan 1941. (His brother, VX14068 Pte R. N. Scott, 2/5 Bn, was killed on the same day.)

[8] Pte F. C. Damm, QX3118; 2/6 Bn. Farmer; of Lagoon Pocket, Qld; b. Maryborough, Qld, 12 Sep 1913. Killed in action 3 Jan 1941. Sgt H. B. Damm, QX3117; 2/6 Bn. Cane and timber cutter; of Gympie district, Qld; b. Maryborough, Qld, 3 Sep 1917.

[9] Lt V. N. Maloney, VX3495; 2/6 Bn. School teacher; of Albert Park, Vic; b. Melbourne, 26 Apr 1914.

[1] Pte H. F. Brockley, VX3497; 2/6 Bn. Mechanic; of Melbourne; b. Liverpool, NSW, 22 Oct 1915. Died 29 Mar 1941.

[2] Lt R. H. Cole, MM, VX5139; 2/6 Bn. Farmer; of Mornington, Vic; b. Melbourne, 2 Jul 1906.

[3] Capt R. H. Kiddle, VX331; 2/6 Bn. Grazier; of Stawell, Vic; b. St Kilda, Vic, 21 May 1904. Killed in action 3 Jan 1941.

saw that they had little chance of advancing through the intense fire, and returned to report to Little, while the men of Cole's platoon cautiously built up little walls of stone for shelter. About 8 o'clock, while Little and Kiddle were conferring in a tributary wadi, an Italian mortar bomb had landed near them and wounded them, Kiddle mortally. Lieutenant Warfe[4] led three carriers into the wadi, fired on the sangars round Post 11 and brought in the wounded Little. Cole's platoon remained behind its stone shelters all day firing on such targets as offered. The company was now commanded by its sergeant-major, Cowie,[5] who led the remaining men forward as far as the fire would allow; and with them the Fusiliers, who coolly fired at Post 11 from this exposed position, losing one man after another until only one gun remained in action, manned by the platoon commander, Sergeant-Major Bell, and the company quartermaster sergeant.[6]

On the right of Little's company, Rowan's had attacked, one of the two leading platoons aiming at Post 9 and the other at 7. The left platoon (Lieutenant Paterson) reached the bottom of the wadi, cut the wire about 150 yards from Post 9, lay among the bushes there to reorganise, and then dashed up the slope spread across a front of about 150 yards. There they ran upon Italians in sangars. Attacking only with grenades they killed twenty-five, took forty-seven prisoners and established themselves, under constant fire from the front and from posts to the left. The right platoon reached the wire at the bottom of the wadi at about six o'clock, and there came under intense fire. Men began to filter back. Rowan, seeing this, ordered the commander of this platoon to reorganise and sent a second platoon against Post 7, but it too was held at the mouth of Rowan wadi. At this stage Privates Phillips,[7] Streeter[8] and Weston[9] of Paterson's platoon advanced along the north bank of the wadi, attacked with a Bren gun and grenades, and soon the post was occupied.

Muhlhan's company meanwhile had gone through the Muatered and occupied some 400 yards of the north bank. During a determined counter-attack by the Italians it occupied Post 7 and took charge of the prisoners there. The Italian counter-attack lasted an hour, but the Victorians held their ground. Ammunition running low, Phillips made four journeys through the fire-swept wadi draped with bandoliers. There was another unsuccessful counter-attack at 3.30 and a third, by about 300 men, at dusk. Thus, at the end of the day the 2/6th held a front of about 600 yards along the north bank of the Wadi Muatered and held Post 7 and

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[4] Lt-Col G. R. Warfe, DSO, MC, VX186. 2/6 Bn 1939-42; OC 2/3 Indep Coy 1942-43; CO 58/59 Bn 1943-44, 2/24 Bn 1945-46. Joiner and shop-fitter; of Caulfield, Vic; b. Leongatha, Vic, 27 Jul 1912.

[5] Lt J. M. Cowie, MM, VX3599; 2/6 Bn. Motor driver; of Melbourne; b. Canada, 11 Mar 1907. Died 31 Jan 1950.

[6] The Fusiliers lost 2 killed and 5 wounded.

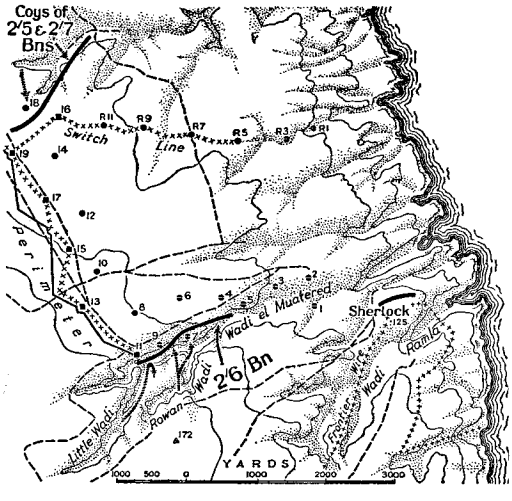
[7] Pte M. M. Phillips, VX15430; 2/6 Bn. Station hand; of Lake Bolac, Vic; b. Radnor, Wales, 10 Mar 1905.

[8] Sgt J. S. Streeter, VX15306; 2/6 Bn. Labourer; of Stawell, Vic; b. Stawell, 11 June 1913.

[9] Pte H. V. Weston, VX14560; 2/6 Bn. Railways employee; of Mildura, Vic; b. Adelaide, 22 Jun 1905.

part of Post 9—it had cost, according to the estimate at dusk, thirty-eight killed or missing and twenty-six wounded.[1]

Meanwhile on the extreme right of the 2/6th's position the Italians had made an effective raid on one of the observation posts of the 2/2nd Field Regiment which was supporting it. Major Arthur,[2] with Lieutenant Crawford,[3] Bombadier Russell[4] and some signallers, had established an observation post on the old Italian frontier wire only a few hundred yards from the edge of the cliffs on the east and the Wadi Muatered to the north. The main concentration of the 2/6th Battalion was nearly two miles to the left. This observation post was to have been protected by the platoon under Lieutenant Sherlock who had originally found the post), which, it will be recalled, was placed on this flank but (according to Sherlock) Arthur's party did not arrive at a rendezvous and he was unable to find the party. Sherlock's task was not only to protect this post but to prevent the escape of the Italians southwards. When dawn broke Arthur found that he was looking into the Italian "backyard". Between his post and the Switch Line were guns, ammunition dumps and observation posts, including the now-familiar ones consisting of a tall pole with a steel drum on top for the observer to stand in. By this time the regiment had begun to fire according to its pre-arranged program, but, by increasing the rate of fire of other guns, Arthur was able to direct the fire of one gun on these new tempting targets. He became anxious about the absence of infantry. At length a party appeared 500 yards on his left, but when he went to see them they had no officer and he found them vague about their future movements. After Italian shells began to fall round his post, Arthur decided to move into a concrete building just beyond the wire a few hundred yards to the right. There he and others observed from the roof while the telephone was operated from within the house, and thence Arthur



Situation southern flank, dusk 3rd January.

[1] The actual losses in the two-day battle were 22 killed and 51 wounded.

[2] Brig A. E. Arthur, DSO, VX83. 2/2 Fd Regt, CRA 11 and 5 Divs 1945. Draftsman; of Burwood, Vic; b. Royal Park, Vic, 30 Aug 1909.

[3] Capt J. M. Crawford, NX3315; 2/2 Fd Regt. Stock worker; of Trangie, NSW; b. Armidale, NSW, 1 Mar 1916.

[4] Lt P. Russell, VX4884. 2/2 and 2 Fd Regts. Agricultural student; of Beaufort, Vic; b. Melbourne, 3 Sep 1919.

directed fire on the Italian guns until a long burst of machine-gun fire drove the observers off the roof. Arthur, now inside the hut, was listening to the voice of Colonel Cremor reporting on the telephone that Lieutenant Nethercote,[5] another observer, had just been killed and warning him to be careful when there was a scuffle and a shout of *"Mani alto!"* He turned and saw the muzzles of several Italian rifles. Without further warning three grenades exploded in the building, wounding Arthur seriously in both legs and Crawford slightly but leaving Russell unscathed. Crawford and Russell were escorted away by the Italian patrol while Arthur lay in the house tying ligatures above each knee with signal wire. A second Italian patrol eventually carried him to the Italian lines.

Nothing but good news had arrived at Mackay's headquarters during the morning of the battle. From 7.3 a.m. onwards reports were wirelessed from a carrier posted near the gap in the Italian line (and in the thickest of the shell fire) for this purpose. At 9 a.m. Major Campbell telephoned to Colonel Berryman from 16th Brigade's headquarters in Post 40 his estimate that they had already taken 8,000 prisoners. About 11 a.m. Mackay went through the shelling in one of a troop of light tanks to see for himself and for two hours coolly watched the developing battle.[6]

During the afternoon, however, lack of definite reports from 17th Brigade caused some anxiety to Mackay's staff and this was not alleviated by a message from the 2/2nd Battalion that they did not know where the 2/5th was, except that part of it was behind the 2/2nd. (In fact both were in their correct areas and hidden from each other by the rough country.) At 3.20 p.m. Mackay, hearing of this, ordered that the 2/8th Battalion of the 19th Brigade should move to the right of 16th Brigade and come under its command. About an hour later Berryman, going forward to Allen's headquarters, passed two companies of the 2/7th moving towards the perimeter and two miles and a half away from it and decided that they could not "do more than arrive inside the perimeter that night."[7] When he arrived at 16th Brigade headquarters he discussed the situation with Brigadier Allen, Colonel Jerram of the 7th Royal Tanks and Frowen of the British medium artillery, and finally gave orders that next day Allen, with all available tanks and with the support of Frowen's guns, should cut off the town of Bardia. Allen told Berryman that he agreed, but asked whether Berryman could give him these instructions without the approval of the general. The staff officer assured Allen that Mackay would agree; "there's no other plan in the field," he said. Thereupon Allen began to prepare an attack for the following day; about midnight the thrustful Berryman telephoned confirmation of the order.

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[5] Lt C. R. Nethercote, VX94; 2/2 Fd Regt. Insurance clerk; of Lake Charm, Vic; b. Hawthorn, Vic, 16 Jul 1916. Killed in action 3 Jan 1941.

[6] The officer commanding the troop was wounded during this reconnaissance.

[7] Quoted from a lecture given by Brig Berryman later in 1941. Actually after having taken a somewhat circuitous route, on Brig Savige's orders, to avoid casualties from fire from perimeter posts held by the enemy, they had arrived just at dusk.

Meanwhile, during the afternoon the 16th Brigade's line had been under intermittent fire, but there was no sign of an effective counter-attack developing. On the left Travers' company of the 2/1st was at 1 p.m. still being held by Posts 55 and 57 (51 had been taken by Lieutenant Rogers'[8] platoon now on Travers' left) and mortars were sent forward to help him. The mortars and a troop of the 104th Royal Horse Artillery bombarded Post 55, which Kennedy then took without casualties at 1.30, while Rogers took 53. Again with the support of the guns of the Royal Horse Artillery and the battalion's mortars Travers' company took Post 57, with about forty prisoners. Kennedy was reorganising this post when to his surprise he saw a white flag waving above 59 on the other side of the wadi; Travers sent Kennedy forward with two sections and a carrier and they took the surrender of some fifty men without firing a shot. However, the battalion's flank was now insecurely extended and in the evening Travers was withdrawn to Posts 53 and 55; the enemy still held 54 and thus during the night there was a wide no-man's land on this flank.

On the right of the 16th Brigade the squadron of the 6th Cavalry was withdrawn into reserve during the afternoon and the 2/2nd Battalion side-stepped to the left and took over its position, the 2/5th now occupying the area formerly held by the 2/2nd.

That night Berryman, who had reached the conclusion that the 17th Brigade was disorganised and tired, and that by the end of the second day the 16th Brigade would be too fatigued for further effort, decided that fresh troops would have to be obtained to finish off the battle. Early the following morning he called Robertson and Herring to a conference, described the situation as he saw it, and said that, if the Italians did not collapse during the day, he thought the remaining two battalions of the 19th Brigade should be launched against the Italians still holding out against the 17th Brigade. When Berryman presented this proposal to Mackay, the older soldier, who was less anxious about the position, said that General O'Connor had asked him to take Bardia with only two brigades, leaving the third fresh at the end of the battle. While they were discussing this, O'Connor and Brigadier Harding,[9] his senior staff officer, arrived. With Mackay's permission Berryman put the plan to O'Connor,[10] who, after a few minutes, agreed to it.

In warfare it is not unusual that, after a set-back, anxiety increases in proportion to the distance from the enemy. If the 17th Brigade was disorganised (as Berryman believed) that disorganisation had been imposed only partly by the enemy and partly by a divisional plan which had split the brigade into two widely-separated groups, and to inadequate tank and (in the later stages) artillery support. The companies who were pressing the southern pocket of the defences would have been surprised to learn that they were believed to be a spent force. But they were tired. The truth

[8] Lt T. L. Rogers, NX131; 2/1 Bn. Journalist; of Sydney; b. Leura, NSW, 4 May 1915.

[9] Field Marshal Sir John Harding, GCB, CBE, DSO, MC. BGS XIII Corps 1940-41; GOC 7 Armd Div 1942-43; Comd XIII Corps 1943. Regular soldier; b. 10 Feb 1896.

[10] O'Connor had been an instructor at the Staff College at Camberley when Berryman and Harding had been students there.

was that the brigade was reaching the end of its strength and, in spite of its gallant efforts to strengthen its fire power by using captured guns, could not make further substantial progress against a well-fortified and still aggressive enemy without the support of guns or tanks, or both, in effective strength.

Nevertheless, as described above, the forward companies of the 17th Brigade had fought on all night and, at dawn, Savige decided that "the position, which at midnight appeared to be hopeless, was secure". He decided to remain in his northern sector and hand over the southern to Godfrey, with Bishop remaining at what now became his rear headquarters. With Cremor of the 2/2nd Field Regiment and Frowen, who arrived at his headquarters on the morning of the 4th, he arranged counter-battery fire on the remaining Italian guns and harassing fire on Posts 4, 6, 8, 11 and 13. He decided to continue the attack and capture Posts 12, 15, 10 and 13 on the right, and on the left, the next two posts along the Switch. Lieutenant McGeoch's[1] company of the 2/7th—the only company not yet committed—had arrived on the field late on the 3rd and occupied Post 16, where, next day, it was under intermittent artillery fire.

While Savige was conferring with Walker and Sell about 11 a.m. concerning this plan, Lieut-Colonel Barker[2] of the 2/1st Field Regiment arrived and artillery support was again discussed. It was decided that because of "the difficulties of communication between forward troops and guns, and the exposed nature of the ground, then being swept by artillery fire over open sights and machine-guns", the attack should be delayed until it could be carried out under cover of darkness. Barker was asked to bombard the posts to be attacked from 3.30 to 5 p.m. Sell was instructed to rest Bennett's company and Griffiths' for the night attack. The leading companies of the 2/7th were only from 35 to 45 strong and very tired.

On the right the 2/2nd Field Regiment, shooting with great accuracy, bombarded Post 11 at 10.25 a.m. and again at 3.30 p.m., obtaining direct hits on the post itself and the sangars around it and Post 9, whence the Victorians had withdrawn to comparative shelter under the north bank of the wadi; but the Italians not only held their positions but fought back strongly with artillery, mortars and small arms. During each bombardment they withdrew from the sangars to the shelter of the concrete posts, but reoccupied them when the artillery ceased fire. During the day Godfrey became increasingly worried by the mounting casualties, and after considering a night attack, abandoned the idea.

While divisional orders for the employment of the 19th Brigade were being prepared, the attack on Bardia town was in progress. The Bardia fortress was divided by a deep irregular depression, the Wadi Gerfan,

[1] Capt B. de B. McGeoch, VX343; 2/7 Bn. Banker; of Wodonga, Vic; b. Canterbury, Vic, 6 Mar 1918.

[2] Brig L. E. S. Barker, CBE, DSO, MC, VX12777. (1st AIF: 8 Fd Arty Bde and 39 Bn.) CO 2/1 Fd Regt 1940-41; Dir of Arty AHQ 1941-42; BRA NGF 1942-43 and 1943-44, First Army 1943 and 1944-45. Regular soldier; of Mulgrave, Vic; b. Mulgrave, 5 May 1895.

which begins outside the ring of perimeter posts and runs into the sea at the town itself in a deeply indented little bay. "Lower Bardia" lies on the northern shore of this inlet; "Upper Bardia" on a headland above it. At the end of 3rd January the 16th Brigade was strung out on a four-mile front on or overlooking the southern bank of the Gerfan, its line on the right crossing the tributary wadi Ghereidia. On the right two roads led away from the Australian positions, one to lower Bardia zigzagging in its final stages down the face of the cliff; and the other north across Gerfan where it joined at right angles a road which led east to upper Bardia and west to the perimeter and beyond.

Allen allotted a troop of three tanks and a company of the Northumberland Fusiliers to the 2/2nd on his right and ordered the commanding officer, Colonel Chilton, to clear the wadis leading to Bardia from the south, while the 2/3rd, with two tanks and Onslow's cavalry squadron, pushed across the Gerfan to the road junction, whence the tanks and the cavalry would advance into upper Bardia while the infantry occupied a line north of the road. The 2/2nd had the support of a battery of the 7th Medium Regiment and the 2/3rd of the 104th Royal Horse Artillery. The 2/1st Battalion would continue the line to the left and clear the enemy from the western part of Gerfan. Chilton ordered two of his companies, Hendry's and Godbold's, to advance down the line of the Scemmas and attack an Italian fort on the southern headland of Bardia, while the three tanks moved on the high ground to their right. At 10 a.m. Hendry's company was assembled at the crossroads and four hours later set off along the precipitous wadi. After three hours of climbing and having taken some hundreds of prisoners on the way, they reached the headland and at 4.45 attacked the fort in open order. The three tanks moved forward from the east to pit their 2-pounder guns against two 6-inch guns, two field guns and five lighter guns in the fort. (But the 6-inch guns were sited so that they were unable to fire inland.) The Italians held their fire until the tanks were 500 yards away, then their field guns opened fire and the tanks replied, their tracer shells hitting the walls of the fort and skidding off. Advancing slowly, the tanks closed in until they were cruising and firing only 400 yards from the fort, with the infantry close behind. One of the tanks made straight for the gate of the fort while the others continued to fire. The appearance of the tank charging towards them persuaded the Italians to resist no longer. They opened the gate and the tanks drove in and cruised round inside, about 300 Italians surrendering. In the dusk Hendry's company then clambered down a goat track into lower Bardia itself and took some thousands of prisoners, while Godbold's company which had advanced to the headland on Hendry's right and Caldwell's cleared out Italians who were sheltering in the little Wadi Helgh el Anz and elsewhere on the south side of the harbour.

Here where the Italian gunners had their backs to the sea and could discern tanks and infantry manoeuvring between them and the town of Bardia, they were in no mood to prolong their resistance. In addition large numbers of depot troops had now sought shelter in the wadis and the

artillery areas near the coast. About midday two carriers from the 2/5th Battalion went out into this country and returned with 1,500 prisoners. Captain Vickery,[3] who had joined the 2/2nd Battalion at midday to direct the fire of guns of the 2/1st Field Regiment, was reconnoitring on the southern edge of the battalion's area in a Bren carrier a little later when he saw an Italian battery which was being shelled by his own artillery. He drove his carrier towards them and fired on them from the rear, whereupon they surrendered. To his surprise he discovered about 1,000 troops waiting to surrender and shepherded them to the 2/5th Battalion. The 2/8th Battalion which Allen ordered forward to high ground south of the Wadi Homer collected some thousands of prisoners there.

On the left of the 2/2nd Onslow's cavalrymen advanced across the Wadi Gerfan with the 2/3rd following on a three-company front. The tanks were late arriving and it was 10.30 before the line of infantrymen moved off. On the right Abbot's company advanced across the flat ground and came to the Gerfan at a point where its banks are so steep that the men took off their greatcoats and haversacks and left them on the top before beginning to clamber down. As they descended some Italians appeared from the caves in the side of the wadi. The Australians shouted "Lashay lay army" (*Lascie le armi*—lay down your arms) at the top of their voices which echoed back from the opposite face of the ravine, and some 800 Italians obeyed and were sent climbing back the way the Australians had come. After a pause for a meal the infantrymen, now desperately tired, climbed on to the road beyond the north bank.

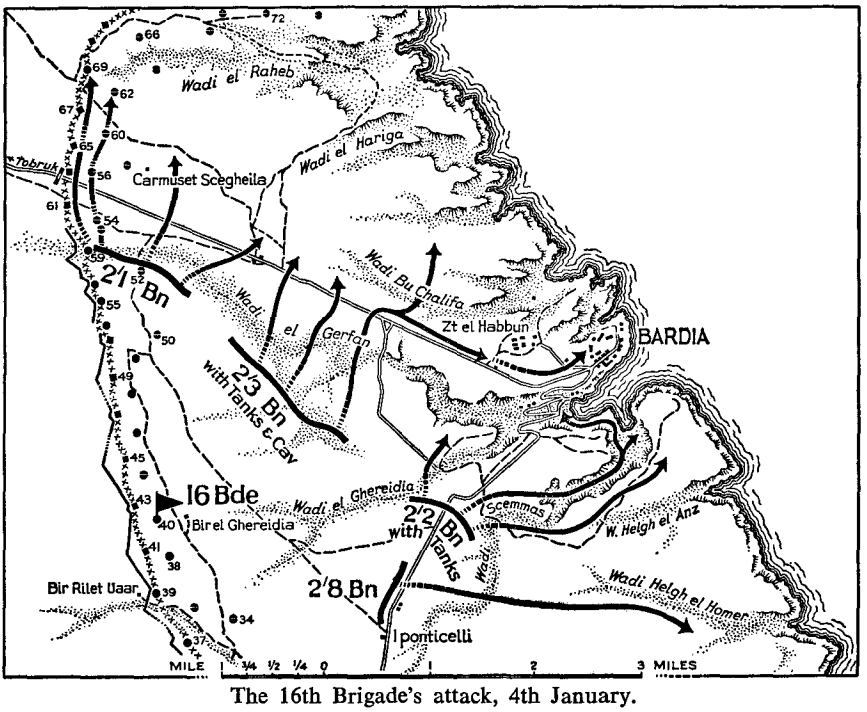
McGregor's company, next to the left, encountered machine-gun fire in the wadi and artillery fire from the opposite side. Artillery and mortar fire was brought down from the Australian side. A section under Lance-Corporal Squires[4] was sent to reconnoitre the wadi. Finding a battery position and many troops crowded around it, they went at these firing as they advanced, and returned to their company shepherding about 500 men. This was a second instalment of an embarrassing collection of prisoners who were taken in the wadi, in the shelter of whose banks many Italian technical units were gathered, and on whose flat, sandy bottom hundreds of vehicles were sheltered. Hutchison's company on the left estimated that they took 2,000 prisoners there, including sixty officers from one dugout. They were now in the soft centre of the Italian garrison, and the column of prisoners streaming back to the south was soon a mile in length. It was led by dapper officers, wearing swords, pith helmets or "Mussolini caps", and knee boots, and shaven and scented. When they were halted for lunch the Australians, dusty, unwashed and weary, collected bottles of champagne from the dugouts these Italians had abandoned and drank it from enamel pannikins. Farther left the 2/1st Battalion found what some believed to be "Graziani's caravan"—a trailer in which

[3] Brig N. A. Vickery, MBE, MC, NX130. 2/1 Fd Regt and 1 Naval Bombardment Gp. Clerk; of North Sydney, NSW; b. Lakemba, NSW, 28 Jul 1917.

[4] L-Cpl F. W. Squires, NX4484; 2/3 Bn. Wood-cutter; of Goulburn, NSW; b. St Peters, NSW, 17 Apr 1905.

were a bed, bottles of choice wine, perfumes and clean silk and linen clothing.

Farther to the left, where the flank of the 2/1st was on the perimeter, Hodge's and Travers' companies pushed forward. At 9 a.m. an attack on the foremost enemy post (54) by Lieutenant Stanton's[5] platoon was met by strong machine-gun fire and an Italian shell put the supporting mortars out of action. Stanton's men were pinned down 300 yards from the post and, about 10.30 a.m., a brisk artillery duel began between Italian guns north of the wadi and a battery of the 3rd R.H.A. south of it. At the same time Privates Kneen and Hurley[6] with an anti-tank rifle duelled with and silenced an anti-tank gun in Post 54 and the attacking platoon was able to withdraw. Meanwhile Colonel Eather organised a

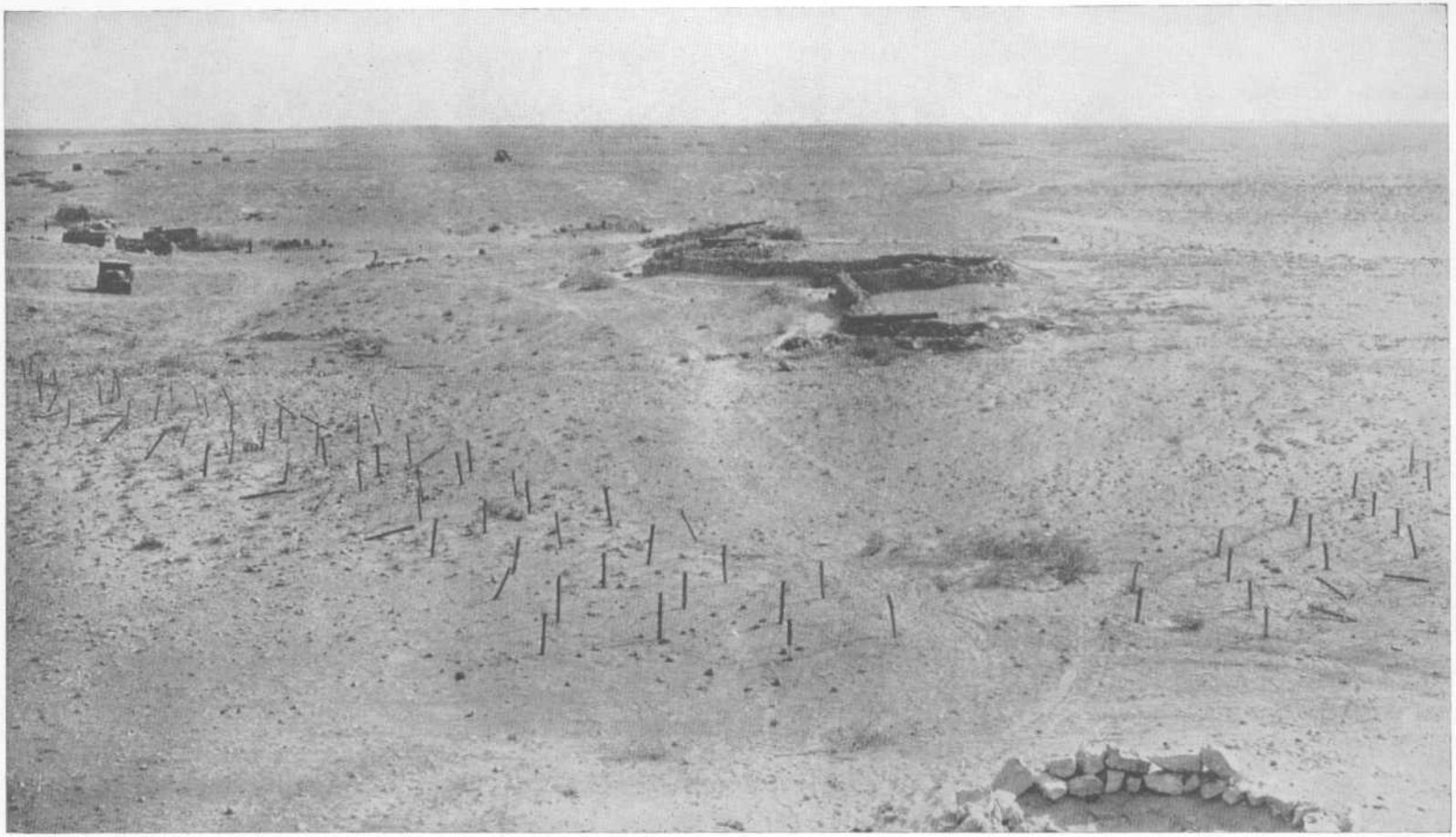


The 16th Brigade's attack, 4th January.

battalion attack, with artillery support, to begin at 1.30 p.m. After a brief bombardment by artillery and mortars the battalion advanced, with two companies forward. By 2 o'clock Kennedy's platoon was in Post 54 which had fought so well and found one-third of the garrison of thirty lying dead or wounded. That was the end of resistance on the northern part of the perimeter. Posts 61 and 56 gave in without a fight. Farther

[5] Lt C. Stanton, NX7550; 2/1 Bn. Farmer; of Lower Burragorang Valley, NSW; b. Sydney, 27 Aug 1917. Killed in action 21 May 1941.

[6] Pte S. M. Hurley, NX7538; 2/1 Bn. Labourer; of Queanbeyan, NSW; b. Stanmore, NSW, 29 Jan 1916.

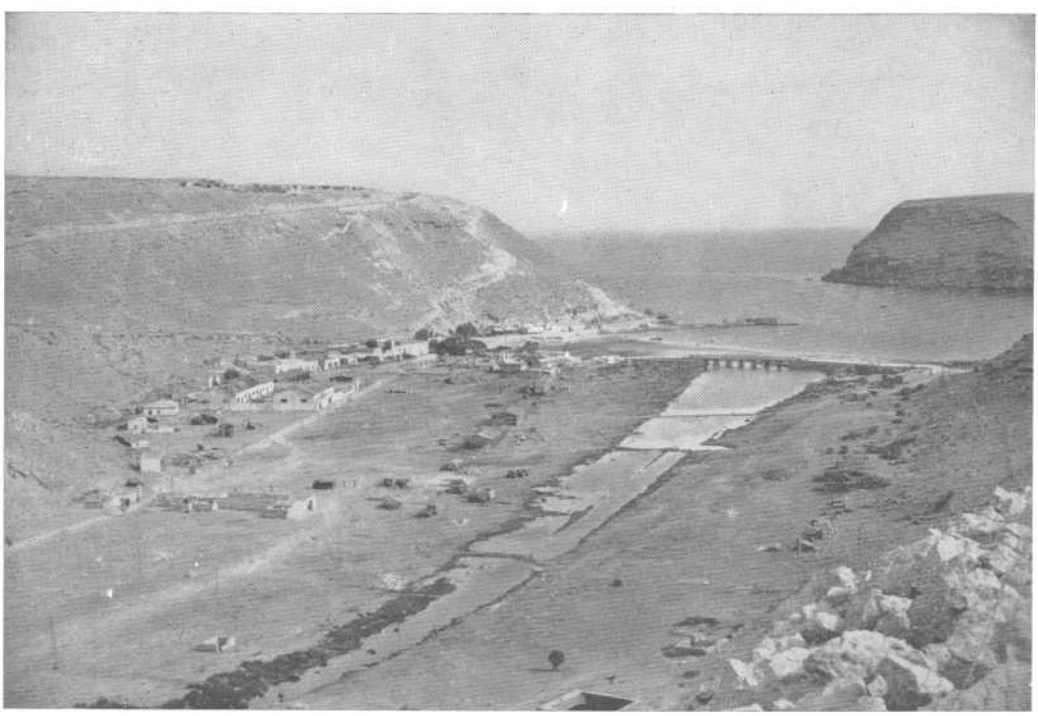


(Imperial War Museum photo)

An abandoned Italian 4-gun battery position within the Bardia fortress, showing the built-up protective sangars typical of the second or third line defences, as distinct from the perimeter defences which were concreted and level with the ground.



Upper Bardia from the sea. The entrance to the small harbour is on the left. (This photograph was taken during the flight of Mr Menzies over the Western Desert during February 1941.)



(Australian War Memorial photos)

Looking down on the harbour and lower town of Bardia. Upper Bardia is on the top of the cliffs in the background.

ahead white flags were flying from 58, 60, 63 and 65 and the gunners near 58 who had been so troublesome were seen parading behind their guns, evidently ready to surrender.

Meanwhile, seeing the evident collapse of the Italian defence, Campbell, who was with England and Onslow, ordered Onslow to occupy Hebs el Harram—the high ground between the road and sea—before the Italians had recovered. When the cavalrymen reached the hospital just north of the road junction they found some Australians there in the crowded green-lined tents that were the wards. The infantry of the 2/3rd, following them, found more than 500 patients and about 3,000 unwounded Italians, most of whom seemed to have collected at the hospital for safety.[7] Onslow led two carriers on to Hebs el Harram, where they took more than 1,000 prisoners while the tanks and the remaining carriers wheeled and advanced along the road under sharp artillery fire from Italian batteries farther north. At 3 o'clock England, seeing his chance, decided to enter the town. Soon the tanks and the cavalry carriers were moving along the final stretch of the road through scattered shell fire with the infantrymen of Abbot's company plodding wearily behind. At 4 p.m. the little column entered the town, tanks leading; then came Lieutenant Mills'[8] carriers, and then, 100 yards behind, Murchison's platoon of the 2/3rd with the remainder of its company following. The tanks drove along the narrow street past battered white-walled buildings firing a shot into a window now and then. A few hundred prisoners were collected; in the inlet below floated five sailing vessels and three others lay foundered.

The rapid success of the 16th Brigade's drive demonstrated that there was little spirit of resistance left in the Italians in the northern sectors. The estimates of prisoners taken during the afternoon were unreliable, because of the impossibility of counting them accurately and the certainty that bands of Italians meandering across the battlefield were "captured" twice over. However, it is probable that, between midday and dusk, no fewer than 10,000 Italians surrendered along the 10,000-yard front of three depleted and weary Australian battalions. About 9 p.m. a British officer was brought to Eather of the 2/1st, which had then reached Posts 69 and 62, to report that he had been captured early in the day when his tank broke down in a feint attack by units of the 7th Armoured Division against the northern sector, and that he had talked the Italians in one of the coastal wadis farther north into agreeing to surrender. Eather, thinking he meant a dozen or so, said: "Bring them in." "But there are 1,500 at least," said the officer. Eather, already embarrassed by the number of his prisoners, wearily told him to return to the wadi and hold the Italians there until the following morning, which he did.

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[7] The cavalrymen left a party at the hospital under a corporal who could speak a few words of Italian, and he and others did what they could, but even the following morning the hospital was chaotic. The Italians were bewildered and helpless and dared not go afield to collect supplies. There were more than forty unburied dead. Among the Australians was Maj Arthur of the 2/2 Fd Regt, gravely wounded in both legs. Only the arrival of the troops had saved him from having both legs amputated by a well-meaning Italian surgeon.

[8] Lt-Col T. Mills, MC, NX174. 6 Cav Regt and CO 2/5 Armd Regt 1943-44, 2/4 Armd Regt 1944-46. Tin miner; of Emmaville, NSW; b. Charters Towers, Qld, 2 Apr 1908.

During the morning of 4th January while Savige was planning to end the Italian resistance in the pocket his brigade had now surrounded, by making a night attack from the north and west, he did not know that, at the same time, Mackay's staff were writing orders for an attack through his area next morning by the fresh 19th Brigade, with tanks and behind an artillery barrage. While this attack was being made Savige's battalions were to stand and watch the new troops pass.

Thus, at midday, Captain Grieve,[9] a liaison officer, arrived from divisional headquarters with orders to Savige that the 17th Brigade, after having taken Posts 12, 15, 10 and 13, was to make no further movement and that, at 5 p.m., the 2/5th would come under the command of Robertson of the 19th Brigade; on the left the 17th Brigade was not to advance beyond R9. Savige explained to the young liaison officer his plan to attack that night with rested companies of the 2/5th, told him he was certain of success, and asked him to represent strongly to the general that he be allowed to carry his plan into effect; he was also to ask that he be given a decision by 5 o'clock.

At 4 p.m. Robertson arrived at Savige's headquarters and asked him when the 2/5th Battalion was to come under his command. Savige described the situation to him and when at 5 p.m. he had received no further message from divisional headquarters, he ordered Griffiths' and Bennett's companies to move forward. At 8 o'clock, however, Sell of the 2/5th arrived and reported that Robertson had requested him to report at 19th Brigade headquarters (near Post 35) and had ordered him to withdraw Bennett's company and Griffiths'. When Savige established communication with Barker's artillery regiment, which was to support his planned attack, he was informed that it had not opened fire but was moving the guns to support Robertson's attack next morning. In effect, the tired but resolute 17th Brigade had been halted.[1]

It was about midday on the 4th when Robertson had received his orders to attack southwards next day. He warned his battalions forthwith and at 5 p.m. that day met his unit commanders and outlined his plan: an attack on a one-battalion front south-east from the line of the Bardia road. He ordered the 2/11th Battalion to lead the attack and the 2/4th to exploit it; the 2/8th, which had now reverted to his command, was to cover the left flank and clear the coastal wadis. The infantry would be shielded by a creeping barrage; the six infantry tanks[2] that were still in action would accompany the leading battalion.

The 2/11th Battalion was to advance with two companies forward. The six tanks were under the command of Captain Honner,[3] who led the

[9] Capt B. R. Grieve, MBE, WX6; 2/11 Bn. Bank officer; of Claremont, WA; b. Claremont, 9 Jan 1913.

[1] After the battle Mackay wrote a letter to Savige in which he said: ". . . Although the sway of battle did not permit you to achieve spectacular results, it is realised that your brigade fulfilled a most important role in the centre of a hive of hostility and by capturing territory, prisoners and guns secured results that in a normal engagement would have been regarded as spectacular . . . my thanks for the way you tackled and kept going a very tangled situation."

[2] Some had had tracks blown off by Italian fire or by mines; in others turrets had jammed or engines had failed.

[3] Lt-Col R. Honner, DSO, MC, WX15. 2/11 Bn; CO 39 Bn 1942-43, 2/14 Bn 1943. Lawyer; of Nedlands, WA; b. Fremantle, WA, 17 Aug 1904.

right-hand company, and he placed them behind his leading platoons. This company was a few minutes late arriving at the starting-line—the company commanders had not received their final orders until only three-quarters of an hour before the time at which they had to cross a line which was then three miles away. Honner's men chased the barrage and managed to catch it up before it ceased, but the flanking company was farther behind. Thus Honner's company led the advance of the brigade, but fortunately was supported by all the available tanks. First they came upon some Italians who did not resist and were waved to the rear. As they approached the Italian gun positions in the southern corner of the fortress they came under accurate shell fire. The men pressed on, none being hit—a result either of "poor fragmentation or miraculous luck". Then they advanced into sharp machine-gun fire; but only one man was hit and he carried on. Soon they were under fire from the front, the right and the left. Three sections of infantry each with a tank silenced the posts on the left.

> We were now covering a front of about half a mile, at times going out like a concertina to overcome opposition and closing in again for control on the axis of attack (wrote Honner afterwards). This caused some slowing down. As soon as a forward platoon was immobilised by being loaded with prisoners, the rear platoon would take its place while prisoners were being disarmed and handed over [to a party of company headquarters personnel]. Then the freed platoon would hurry after the company to be ready to fill any fresh gap in the front . . . . Once a tank shot into the lead in the rush on an enemy post, a few tank shells usually sufficed to bring up a white flag.

At some points Italian resistance ceased as soon as the West Australians came to close quarters, but enemy fire was maintained from posts farther away.

Among some thousands of prisoners collected by the 19th Brigade as it advanced southward were the commanders of the *62nd* and *63rd Divisions*. The brigade lost only three men wounded. As its attack moved forward the leading companies of the 2/7th Battalion on its right occupied the posts as far south as Post 10.

In the south Godfrey kept a watchful eye on the advance of the 19th Brigade. As its advance began Rowan's company, which had been patrolling closely round Post 11 during the night, moved into the surrounding sangars. By 11.30 Rowan's men were close to the post, whose garrison defiantly ran up an Italian flag. Meanwhile Godfrey had ordered Lieutenant Warfe with his carrier platoon to take Post 13 on the left. Warfe led seven carriers straight at it over flat country. Just short of the tank ditch round it they ran through a minefield, one carrier exploding a mine, killing the driver and wounding the gunner. The remaining carriers however, lined up along the ditch and fired their weapons continuously while Warfe, Sergeant McKay[4] and Corporal McCallum[5] went forward, cut the wire

[4] Sgt H. McKay, VX4535; 2/6 Bn. Bank clerk; of Melbourne; b. Brisbane, 30 Jan 1912.
[5] WO2 A. McCallum, VX3212; 2/6 Bn. Station hand; of Wentworth, NSW; b. Grenfell, NSW, 17 Oct 1908.

and ran in throwing grenades. A white flag was waved over the post and more than seventy Italians emerged. At this moment two tanks with some carriers of 6th Divisional Cavalry appeared from the north and silenced and took Post 8, whence an anti-tank gun had been firing at Warfe's carriers, which had also been under machine-gun and anti-tank fire from Post 11.

The appearance of the tanks convinced the dogged Italian commander of Post 11 that honour had been satisfied. He hoisted the white flag and the men of the 2/6th rose and went forward to take the surrender. Close on their heels was Godfrey himself who sought out the Italian leader and shook his hand. Out of the post (whose normal garrison would have been a platoon) came crowding 350 Italians, including twenty-four officers.[6] In it were two field guns, two 3-inch mortars and some of smaller calibre, 6 anti-tank guns, 12 medium and 27 light machine-guns, and 325 rifles. It was this post which, two days before, some fifty Australians had confidently attacked armed only with rifles and grenades. On a battlefield where Italian troops won little honour, the last to give in belonged to a garrison whose resolute fight would have done credit to any army.

On the morning of the 5th while resistance was being overcome at the southern end of the perimeter the 16th Brigade moving north and the Support Group of the 7th Armoured Division moving south were mopping up the northern corner. There since 7 a.m. on the 3rd patrols of the Support Group had kept the Italian posts facing north under fire. At 9 a.m. on the 5th the 2/3rd and 2/2nd Battalions advanced. The only opposition came from a battery on the coast which fired over open sights on the 2/3rd until silenced by "F" Battery, Royal Horse Artillery. By midday the Australians and the men of the Support Group had linked at the northern edge of the fortress, each having collected some thousands of prisoners. There had been time, however, for parties of Italians to escape westward through the rugged country at the northern end of the perimeter. Early on the 6th Colonel Eather was informed that a large group was moving along the coast towards Tobruk, and sent out a reinforced platoon in trucks and carriers. Later in the day these returned with some 1,500 prisoners.

During the battle Blenheim squadrons bombed the airfields at Gazala, Derna and Tmimi and beyond, and Hurricanes of three squadrons also patrolled to the west. Gladiators of No. 3 Australian Squadron flew low over the battlefield, machine-gunning Italian batteries, and protecting one or more Lysander army cooperation aircraft flying continuously low above the Italian guns spotting for the artillery and reporting the progress of the advance. So thoroughly had the squadrons done their work that on the critical day no Italian aircraft was seen by the infantry; though they flew seventy-seven sorties in the three days the pilots of No. 3 Squadron were not challenged by enemy machines. On the afternoon of the 5th

[6] Two unwounded Australian prisoners were in the post, where they had been well treated.

after the battle was over, Italian aircraft dropped some bombs in the southern sector.

The precise number of prisoners taken at Bardia cannot be established. The communiqué published after the battle gave the Italian losses in killed and captured as 44,868. This was the "ration strength" of the force in Bardia at 26th December according to a captured document. The actual number of prisoners and dead (even assuming their ration strength to have been correctly estimated by the Italians, which now seems unlikely) must have been somewhat lower when allowance is made for a number (including General Bergonzoli himself and three of his divisional commanders) who escaped and set off on foot or in boats along the coast towards Tobruk. Those who remained as prisoners probably numbered about 40,000.

A table compiled by the Italian General Staff on 15th January showed that 80,465 officers and men had been lost in the Sidi Barrani-Bardia operations, including some 14,000 Libyan troops. The prisoners taken in the Sidi Barrani battle were estimated by their captors at 38,300. The number of the dead is not recorded, but, if it had been 1,000, the Italian losses at Bardia would, on these figures, have totalled 41,165.

The staffs had been anxious lest the Italians should destroy the water supply of Bardia, most of which was pumped from wells and reticulated throughout the area in long pipe lines. To their great relief the Australian engineers found no damage to any wells, mains or pumps, and estimated the output at 400 tons a day. There was fuel enough for four weeks' constant pumping.[7] The water was drinkable but, like all the desert water, so brackish as to be unpalatable.

The captured guns outnumbered by more than two to one those of XIII Corps. There were 26 coast defence guns, 7 medium guns (of about 6-inch calibre), 216 field guns, 26 heavy anti-aircraft guns, 41 infantry guns (of 65-mm), 146 anti-tank guns, 12 serviceable medium tanks armed with a 47-mm gun and machine-guns, and 115 of the ineffective Italian light tanks. In view of the long advance ahead, the gain of most importance to the victorious army, whose trucks were beginning to wear out, was the capture of 708 motor vehicles (not including motor-cycles).

Before the battle opened orders were issued throughout the division that captured material was of great value "to the Empire and its allies" and care must be taken that gun sights, wireless gear, etc., should not be needlessly damaged and that captured enemy vehicles should not be taken into use by units. When Dominion soldiers arrive overseas their cousins of the British command are inclined to regard them with the eye of a governess when some hitherto unknown children are suddenly mixed with her brood. When something unexpected and undesired occurs, it is safe to guess that the newcomers will be blamed for it. Late-arriving officers from XIII Corps headquarters, exploring the battlefield, found that gun

[7] A New Zealand Fd Park Coy took over the water supply of Bardia on 5 Jan.

sights had been smashed, wireless sets ruined, offices ransacked; their immediate conclusion seems to have been that the unruly Australians had done this damage. By the time reports reached headquarters at Cairo fairly precise estimates were being made of the money value of "the equipment ruined by the Australians at Bardia"; the rumours spread and after the campaign Australians learnt from Egyptian civilian friends that they had "looted Derna and Benghazi". Such damage as was actually done to instruments and signal equipment (except in rare cases where weapons were broken to prevent their being used against the captors later) was in fact done by the Italians themselves, who were not such poor soldiers as not to realise that to damage their equipment before surrender was a duty. In some areas, particularly on the third day, the sights of practically every gun were smashed when the infantry arrived on the scene. Signal equipment was often broken—the work of a moment. But the Australians had been so short of equipment and for so long that they were not in the mood to destroy good gear when they found it. Men who had been allowed, during the final phase of training, to fire only one shot from their recently-acquired anti-tank rifles because ammunition was so scarce, and were short of anti-tank guns, field glasses and compasses, to name only a few, were not likely wantonly to destroy Italian weapons and gun sights when they found them. The Australian's first reaction was to "nut out" captured weapons, partly in satisfaction of that inquisitiveness which is one of his principal military virtues, and partly in case he needed to turn the weapons against the enemy (as he often did).[8]

In the course of the battle the infantrymen equipped themselves at the Italians' expense with pistols, watches and compasses, enough for their own needs. Some of those who followed behind the infantry, and, particularly, the provosts and men of units which travelled in trucks and not on foot and—unlike the infantry—could thus afford to weigh down their packs, acquired the reputation of collecting such property in wholesale quantities. On the other hand there were many—particularly among the infantry—who would not take any personal property from a captured enemy. Some Australian units had not been well instructed by their officers concerning respect for prisoners' personal property. With the Australians the fair treatment of prisoners seems often to have been an outcome less of formal instruction than of the fellow feeling that exists between fighting troops on both sides because of common dangers and hardships, and which leads to display of sympathy and consideration as soon as the heat of battle has cooled. It seems to have been the general experience that the bullying captor and the looter was seldom a front-line soldier with whom shots had been exchanged, but usually a man whose place in battle had been behind the lines.

[8] The Australians considered that nearly every sort of Italian weapon compared unfavourably with their own. The Italian rifle seemed like a toy beside the Lee-Enfield; the red-painted, thin-skinned grenade was far less lethal than the British equivalent. The Italian field guns "were of all sizes, shapes and vintages; shell fragmentation seemed poor and many men blown off their feet got up again."

In the Italian stores and dugouts was much wine and many barrels of fierce, raw brandy. If the legend had been true, that the Australian soldier though fiery in battle is unmanageable out of it, the field of Bardia should have been the scene of much drunkenness, yet one commander could write after the battle: "The behaviour of the troops in the face of quantities of liquor found in enemy positions was exemplary. In some cases quantities of liquor were destroyed to avert any trouble." In a less formal report a battalion medical officer wrote: "Instead of having German troops to bolster them up they (the Italians) had a very ample supply of Cognac, Marsala and Red Ned.[9] Our regimental police destroyed 1,200 gallons (so they say) today."

After the defeat at Sidi Barrani and the withdrawal to Bardia, General Bergonzoli had at his disposal in his *XXIII Corps* the relatively fresh *62nd Division* (about 7,500 strong) the battered *63rd* (6,800 strong and very short of infantry), *1st Blackshirt* (6,800) and *2nd Blackshirt* (5,200). In addition there were some 10,800 corps troops, largely artillery, tank units and Bersaglieri motor-cyclists, and 7,600 "fortress troops"; these appear to have included the considerable number of survivors of the *64th Division*.[1] As has been recorded, he possessed 290 field and medium guns and 127 tanks. Thus he had approximately twice as many men, three times as many guns and twice as many tanks as the attackers had estimated. The error was due to an exaggerated calculation of the damage done to the Italian force at Sidi Barrani, whence the *62nd* (from the Halfaya area) and the *63rd* (from Sofafi) had joined the *1st Blackshirt* in Bardia without great loss, and a substantial part of the *64th* and the *2nd Blackshirt* had been saved. After Bardia, of the eight Italian and two Libyan infantry divisions which had been in Cyrenaica or on the way thither when the British offensive began, only two Italian infantry divisions remained—the *60th* (*Sabratha*) and *61st* (*Sirte*); there was also an armoured group. However, it was believed (correctly) at Cairo that four more divisions—the *17th* (*Pavia*), *25th* (*Bologna*), *27th* (*Brescia*) and *55th* (*Savona*)—were in Tripolitania. Thus half the metropolitan divisions in North Africa had now been destroyed. However, the loss represented only about one-third of the total number of Italian troops in North Africa. Of the 248,000 in North Africa when the offensive opened some 80,000 had been lost. There remained about 79,000 with 942 guns in Cyrenaica and about 89,000 with 516 guns in Tripolitania; there were now 313 tanks and armoured cars in Cyrenaica, and none in Tripolitania.

Soon after Bergonzoli was besieged in Bardia, Mussolini sent him a characteristic message. "I have given you a difficult task," he wrote, "but one suited to your courage and your experience as an old and intrepid soldier—the task of defending the fortress of Bardia to the last. I am certain that 'Electric Beard' and his brave soldiers will stand at whatever cost faithful to the last." To this Bergonzoli replied (through Graziani, his Commander-in-Chief): "I am aware of the honour and I have today repeated to my troops your message—simple and unequivocal. In Bardia we are and here we stay."

There is some evidence that the Italian commander and his subordinates were satisfied that they would not be attacked but that the British-

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[9] "Red Ned" was an Australian term for inexpensive "port" wine of which Australia was a large-scale exporter.

[1] Possibly each of these figures is a few hundred more than the actual strength on 3 Jan.

Australian force would try to starve them out. A few days before the battle Bergonzoli sent a message to Mussolini that Bardia was "impregnable", and he may have believed it. It was a formidable fortress of a kind which had not been broken into during that war and, despite consistent over-estimates of the British numbers, he was probably confident of being stronger in artillery; he had 5,000 men to each mile of front.[3]

In Italy, however, the defeat at Sidi Barrani had caused the deepest melancholy. The upper strata of the army and navy were fractured by intrigue no less than was the clique which surrounded Mussolini himself. The picture of the Generals which Ciano painted in his diary showed a group of jealous and spiteful men, subject to fits of intense excitement, even of tears. The disaster in Africa confirmed Mussolini's belief that the Italians were "a race of sheep", and his generals most of all. On 12th December Ciano had learned that a catastrophic telegram had arrived from Graziani, "a mixture of excitement, rhetoric and concern." Graziani was thinking of withdrawing to Tripoli "in order to keep the flag flying on that fortress at least" and declared that he had been obliged to wage a war "of the flea against the elephant."

"Five generals are prisoners and one is dead," exclaimed Mussolini to Ciano. "This is the percentage of Italians who have military characteristics and those who have none. In the future we shall select an army of professionals, selecting them out of twelve to thirteen million Italians there in the valley of the Po and in part of central Italy. All the others will be put to work making arms for the warrior aristocracy."

Graziani next sent a message to Mussolini "scolding" him for having allowed himself to be misled by his military advisers in Rome; on 15th December he dispatched his wife to Ciano with a letter pleading for "mass intervention of German aircraft"; on 24th December, through an agent in Italy he accused Badoglio of treachery and talked of suicide. Throughout all this, Mussolini, relatively serene, considered that the British advance could be stopped at the approaches to Derna. At Rome it was believed inevitable that Tobruk would fall and on 3rd January began the removal to Barce of civilians from the villages between Tobruk and Derna—Martuba, Umm er Rzem and others.

By 3 p.m. on the first day of the attack on Bardia, Bergonzoli was in despair and signalled to General Tellera, then commanding the *Tenth Army* with headquarters at Tobruk, asking for "intervention". He had destroyed his ciphers, lest the enemy capture them. At 8.10 p.m. he informed the headquarters of *Tenth Army* that he would try to close in round the town of Bardia that night and continue to resist. "If you can, send aircraft from dawn onwards." At 4 o'clock on the afternoon of 4th January, however, the Bardia radio became silent. (The British tanks and Australian infantry were then entering the town.) "The resistance of our troops was brief," wrote Ciano in his diary, "—a matter of hours. And yet there was no lack of arms. The guns alone numbered 430 . . . Is this

[3] It is hardly likely that the "250,000 men with 1,000 aircraft" which the Rome radio announced to have been launched against Bardia represented the Italian commander's estimate.

still a case of the flea against the elephant?" "A peculiar flea," Mussolini said to him, "one that between Sidi Barrani, Bardia and Tobruk had at its disposal more than 1,000 guns.[4] One day I shall decide to open the dikes and tell the whole truth to the Italians who have been befuddled by too many lies."

After Bardia Mussolini had not even one dead general to rejoice over. Bergonzoli escaped to Tobruk and beyond. Tracchia of the *62nd Division* and Guidia of the *63rd* were captured in Bardia, Antonelli of the *1st Blackshirt* and Argentino of the *2nd* were captured making their way on foot towards Tobruk. Amico, the former commander of the *64th Division* who had been given charge of the fortress troops at Bardia, again escaped.

A few days before the attack on Bardia opened Hitler informed Mussolini that he did not consider that a large-scale counter-attack could be made in North Africa for three or four months, and then the weather would be so hot that tanks could not be used to advantage. However, the German naval staff advised Hitler that the British successes should not be under-estimated. They had eliminated the threat to Britain's position in the Middle East, and Italy's power of resistance had been seriously lowered. Hitler was advised also that Italian military leadership was lamentably inefficient. On 11th January Hitler directed that German units be sent to Africa to help the Italians to check the British armoured force, and that the main task of the *X German Air Corps,* recently arrived in Sicily, be to attack British shipping and bases in the central Mediterranean. A few days later it was decided that the German reinforcements should take the form of some anti-tank artillery, anti-aircraft artillery, armoured cars and a tank unit, the whole to be named the *5th Light Division,* and that it would embark from 15th February.

Although he had wagered heavily on the lack of spirit and the proved inefficiency of the Italian Army, O'Connor had set the Australians a task which would have tested the keenest and most experienced troops. After the battle some Australian senior officers who had served in France in 1916-18 and were not present at the battle made little of the Italian resistance and expressed anxiety lest the new Australian Imperial Force should be spoiled by easy victories. At many points, however, the Italians had fought hard, and in proportion the infantry casualties had been higher than at Sidi Barrani; there three brigades of the 4th Indian Division lost 435, whereas at Bardia two brigades lost 420.[5] The fighting had been fierce at Post 11, and at a number of other points round the perimeter. And the Australians had been thoroughly trained—better perhaps than

[4] According to British records, at Sidi Barrani 400 guns of all types were captured, at Bardia 455, and at Tobruk 236 of 75-mm or over. The Italian staff recorded that 960 guns were lost in the Sidi Barrani-Bardia operations, this figure including guns mounted in tanks, which were evidently omitted from the British figure.

[5] The casualties in the infantry battalions from 12 Dec to 5 Jan were:

16 Bde	Offrs	ORs	*17 Bde*	Offrs	ORs	*19 Bde*	Offrs	ORs
2/1 Bn . .	3	51	2/5 Bn . .	7	62	2/4 Bn . .	—	7
2/2 Bn . .	9	78	2/6 Bn . .	4	69	2/8 Bn . .	—	3
2/3 Bn . .	5	56	2/7 Bn . .	8	68	2/11 Bn . .	—	1

The total casualties in 6 Div were 130 killed and died of wounds, and 326 wounded.

was generally realised throughout the division itself at the time—and were in splendid fettle. The division, particularly the junior staff and the company commanders, still had much to learn, but it is doubtful whether in the succeeding five years any Australian force was fitter for battle than the 6th Division at Bardia. The fact that it was a volunteer force formed at a time when there was a marked lack of enthusiasm about the "special force" meant that it attracted particularly keen and impetuous spirits both from the militia, whence nearly all the officers were drawn, and from the people generally. The senior commanders and most of the regimental ones had been chosen from a large pool of leaders who had served with distinction in the First A.I.F.; the younger officers had been brought up by such men, and in them, as in the rank and file, the proud traditions of that force were deeply engrained. In almost every platoon were men whose fathers had served in the old A.I.F. and who were resolved to prove themselves as formidable as their fathers—and, rightly or wrongly, they believed that the First A.I.F. had been the finest force in the world in its day. For a number of reasons, among them being the fact that the old A.I.F. consisted mainly of fighting troops and the high pride and *esprit de corps* of the force in 1918, the "returned soldier" had been honoured by the younger generation in Australia to a degree unattainable under conscription, or under conditions which would not permit so clear a distinction between soldier and civilian.

To these men's consciousness of an exacting tradition was added a confidence which had grown steadily deeper during the training in Palestine and Egypt and was the stronger because the standards there in field exercises and in the schools had been set by regular troops for whose efficiency they had a great admiration, though they frequently fell foul of one another when off duty. The younger men had full confidence in their leaders and particularly (at this stage) in those who had been in battle before. By these veteran commanders they had been schooled inflexibly in the kind of aggressive patrolling in which the old force had excelled, and in the doctrine that battles are won by attacking.

The wisdom of the older citizen officers was founded on four or more years as regimental officers in the war of 1914-18 (longer in the case of some who had soldiered on in the Levant and India after 1918) and kept alive by study and militia service between the wars. The lieutenants and sergeants had time to learn their trade between 1939 and 1941. But the parsimonious treatment of the Australian Army in the years between the wars, with its night parades, its eight or ten days of annual training, its uncertain future and its constantly changing organisation, left gaps that were hard to remedy in the experience of officers of the middle ranks. They had come to the command of battalions and companies without full apprenticeship, and though they proved relatively successful when tested in battle, this was not a justification of the system that produced them but an index of the native intelligence and force of character of the men who had kept the Australian Army alive in the lean years. However, this group

included young leaders of great capacity who were destined to rank among the outstanding commanders of the Second A.I.F.—men such as Eather, Dougherty, Chilton, Walker and Porter,[6] among the infantrymen. These, by intense devotion to soldiering, had made it a second profession during the peace years and had attained a degree of proficiency well beyond what the militia system demanded.

From the point of view of military theory, the success at Bardia demonstrated that there is no fortress so strong in its engineering that men of determination and cunning, and with weapons in their hands, cannot take it. For twenty years one school of military writers had insisted that quick-firing weapons, wire and concrete had made the holding of prepared defences easy, another school that mobile guns protected with armour would decide the outcome of future battles (if fleets of bombers, demolishing whole cities at their first onslaught, had not made the advance of armadas of tanks superfluous). At Bardia, however, the decisive work was done by ingenious and resolute foot soldiers moving, at first under cover of darkness, close behind an artillery barrage which drove the enemy to shelter at the critical moment. It was a victory for bold reconnaissance, for audacious yet careful planning, for an artillery scheme which subdued the enemy's fire at the vital time, and a rapid and continuing infantry assault which broke a gap in the enemy's line. Later, tanks followed the infantry in, then led them, preventing many casualties, particularly on the right flank of the main attack. However, to ascribe the success either to tanks as the overwhelming arm (as some writers have done), or to the artillery, is to present *Hamlet* without the Prince.[7]

The success achieved by the German Air Force in Poland, Norway and France—its influence in those operations had been greatly over-estimated—naturally had led the leaders and men in the Middle East to expect that their forward troops would be subjected to fairly powerful air attack. It has been seen that at Sidi Barrani and Bardia the Italian Air Force, mastered by the numerically smaller but more aggressive Desert Air Force, achieved negligible results. Henceforward the troops appear increasingly to have disregarded the possibility of effective interference by the opposing air force, and, somewhat to the anxiety of the senior leaders, to have neglected precautions, such as dispersal of vehicles.

Although the Italians had spent immense labour and great quantities of material on the defences at Bardia, the fortress had three outstanding weaknesses. First, there was the defect inherent in all fixed defences, that

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[6] Maj-Gen S. H. W. C. Porter, CBE, DSO, VX133. 2/5 Bn 1939-41; CO 2/6 Bn 1941, 2/31 Bn 1941-42; Comd 30 Bde 1942-43, 24 Bde 1943-45. Bank official; of Wangaratta, Vic; b. Tintaldra, Vic, 23 Feb 1905.

[7] "Even had the spirit of the Italians been high, their tanks were individually weak and few in numbers" (wrote H. Nickerson in *Arms and Policy*, (1945) p. 142). "The bold and rapid moves of the individually superior British tanks repeatedly surprised them, and dominated the operation. The British armour was impervious to the Italian anti-tank guns, and in two engagements Italian infantry enormously superior in numbers surrendered to it." To sum up the battles in Cyrenaica in such terms is to attribute to a single depleted battalion of tanks greater power than it possessed. Such assessments of the early battles in Cyrenaica are not based on official reports because these were not published until after the war. For example, Wavell in his dispatch on *Operations in the Western Desert from December 7th, 1940 to February 7th, 1941* wrote: "The diminished resources of infantry tanks necessitated a bold employment of infantry both in the assault and in the exploitation."

they bottle up the defending force in relatively large groups within works whose character can be exactly determined by bold patrolling and aerial photographs, and on a section of which an attack by locally-superior forces can be concentrated. Second, the Italian posts with their deep concrete-sided trenches and magazines encouraged the garrisons to seek shelter away from the uncovered weapon posts during bombardment. Third, the double line of posts was a thin crust unsupported by effective inner defences; nor had Bergonzoli, in spite of the size of his force, organised within the fortress a force which would deliver a substantial counter-attack.

CHAPTER 9

THE CAPTURE OF TOBRUK

BEFORE Bardia fell General Wavell had decided that Tobruk also should be taken, partly because the possession of that port would ease his supply problems. Lack of vehicles and the consequent shortage of food, water, ammunition and petrol in the forward area was a cause of anxiety to the British staffs. To an extent the advancing army was living on the country; it was employing captured vehicles and consuming captured petrol and rations, but these were dwindling assets and if the harbour of Tobruk was secured most of the needed supplies could be carried forward from the base in Egypt by sea. It was with the object of advancing swiftly on Tobruk as soon as Bardia had fallen that General O'Connor had sought to keep the 19th Australian Brigade out of the fight there and ready to move forward promptly with the armoured division.

However, within a few days after the fall of Bardia Wavell received a warning from London that a halt might soon be called to the advance through Cyrenaica. On 6th January Mr Churchill wrote for his Chiefs of Staff an appreciation of "the war as a whole."[1] In the course of it he said that when the port of Tobruk had been taken it should become a main supply base for the force in Cyrenaica, and land communications with Alexandria dropped "almost entirely." For a striking force in Cyrenaica, he wrote, "the 2nd and 7th British Armoured Divisions, the 6th Australian Division, the New Zealand brigade group, soon to become a division, with perhaps one or two British brigades . . . should suffice to overpower the remaining Italian resistance and to take Benghazi . . . With the capture of Benghazi this phase of the Libyan campaign would be ended." It would suffice for the general strategy if Benghazi was occupied "at any time during March." In other words Churchill considered that a force twice as large as that already deployed in Cyrenaica would be needed to take Benghazi, and beyond Benghazi there should be no further advance. Churchill now had information from Madrid that it was unlikely that Spain would ally herself with Germany and he had informed Marshal Pétain, the head of the Vichy French Government, that if France resumed the war against Germany using her North African colonies as a base, Britain would reinforce her with up to six divisions and naval and air forces. Two other irons were in the fire: the British Chiefs of Staff were studying a plan for the invasion of Sicily and, Churchill said, should the Greeks be checked in Albania there would probably be immediate demands from that quarter for more aid. He continued:

> All accounts go to show that a Greek failure to take Valona will have very bad consequences. It may be possible for General Wavell, with no more than the forces he is now using in the Western Desert, and in spite of some reduction in his Air Force, to conquer the Cyrenaica province and establish himself at Benghazi; but it would not be right for the sake of Benghazi to lose the chance of the Greeks

[1] W. S. Churchill, *The Second World War*, Vol. III (1950), p. 5.

taking Valona, and thus to dispirit and anger them, and perhaps make them in the mood for a separate peace with Italy. Therefore the prospect must be faced that after Tobruk the further westward advance of the Army of the Nile may be seriously cramped. It is quite clear to me that supporting Greece must have priority after the western flank of Egypt has been made secure.[2]

On 8th January, after learning from the Foreign Minister, Mr Eden, that it appeared that the Germans were hastening preparations to invade Greece, the Defence Committee in London agreed that "in view of the probability of an early German advance into Greece through Bulgaria it was of the first importance, from the political point of view, that we should do everything possible, by hook or by crook, to send at once to Greece the fullest support within our power."[3] On the same day, Churchill records, the veteran and influential South African leader, General Smuts, expressed to him the opinion that the advance in North Africa should terminate at Tobruk, and steps be taken to assemble a strong army against a possible German advance through the Balkans.

On 6th January Churchill had contemplated concentrating the equivalent of four divisions in Cyrenaica for a leisurely advance on Benghazi during the following two or three months. On the 8th, however, "the Chiefs of Staff warned the commanders in the Middle East that a German attack on Greece might start before the end of the month", and added that as soon as Tobruk had been taken all operations in the Middle East were to be subordinated to sending the maximum help to the Greeks. The Middle East commanders were to inform the Greek Government of this decision and offer them a reinforcement. Wavell and his colleagues in the Middle East submitted that the German concentration in Rumania might merely be a bluff designed to cause them to halt the advance in Libya. Churchill thereupon, on 10th January, sent Wavell a cable repeating that his information indicated that the Germans would move through Bulgaria before the end of January and requiring Wavell's "prompt and active compliance" with the decisions of himself and the Chiefs of Staff.

The aid which the Chiefs of Staff proposed to offer the Greeks at this time—a force of not more than one squadron of infantry tanks, one regiment of cruiser tanks, ten regiments of artillery and five squadrons of aircraft—was so small and ill-balanced that it is difficult to comprehend, first, why they believed it might achieve any effective results in Greece, and, second, why its subtraction from the forces in Africa and Palestine should necessitate halting the advance in North Africa at Tobruk. However, Wavell and Longmore hastened to Athens to make the offer. There, on the 14th and 15th, they conferred with the Greek leaders, who declined the proposed contingent on the grounds that "while hardly constituting any appreciable reinforcement for the Greek forces, would, on the contrary, if known to the Germans, provide the latter with a pretext for attack and hasten their advance through Bulgaria with a view to assailing us."[4]

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[2] Churchill, p. 9.

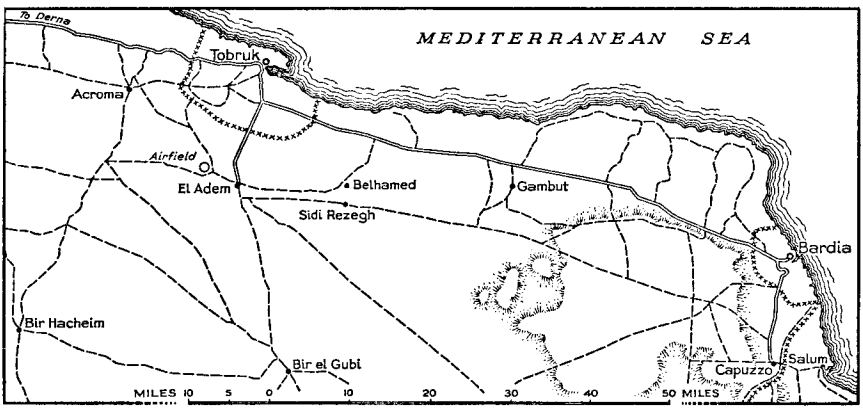
[3] Churchill, p. 14.

[4] A. Papagos, *The Battle of Greece 1940-41* (1945). These negotiations are described more fully in the next volume of this series.

In consequence of this refusal Churchill and the Chiefs of Staff decided to continue the advance to Benghazi and on the 21st January informed Wavell that the capture of that place was now of the highest importance.

During these exchanges, which thus proved sterile, General O'Connor's preparations to capture Tobruk continued. Documents captured at Bardia and interrogation of prisoners had given him a fairly clear picture of the garrison of Tobruk. On 15th January it was estimated to comprise 25,000 men, including General della Mura's *61st (Sirte) Division,* two additional infantry battalions and 7,000 garrison and depot troops with some 220 guns, 45 light and 20 medium tanks, the whole force being under the command of General Petassi Manella, the commander of the Italian *XXII Corps.* Farther west (he believed) was the *XX Corps,* with the *60th (Sabratha) Division* probably at Derna, an armoured force under General Babini at Mechili and, perhaps, the *17th (Pavia) Division* in the Benghazi area.

Two main routes led westwards from Bardia to the Tobruk area. As close to the sea as the deep coastal wadis would allow travelled the straight bitumen road to Tobruk itself. Some ten miles farther inland, and above an escarpment that rose about 500 feet above sea level, ran the track from Capuzzo to El Adem, an airfield eight miles south of the Tobruk defences. General O'Connor ordered the 7th Armoured Division to



advance along the Capuzzo track, and the 6th Australian to move parallel to it along the main road. Consequently, on the morning of 5th January, before resistance had ceased at Bardia, the 7th Armoured Brigade had moved westward, occupied the airfield at El Adem without opposition, and probed to Acroma seeking a suitable area in which to cut the enemy's communications. The 4th Armoured Brigade followed as far as Belhamed; the Support Group to a concentration area south of the Capuzzo track about twenty miles farther east.

Next day patrols of the 7th Armoured Brigade reconnoitred the Tobruk defences and were shelled by Italian guns; twenty miles south of El Adem

the 11th Hussars found the Bir el Gubi airfield unoccupied and patrolled thence to Bir Hacheim. A regiment of tanks and a company of infantry occupied Acroma, at the top of an escarpment leading down to the main road west from Tobruk, which was then virtually encircled.

In Bardia, while the last Italian prisoners were being collected and the booty was being counted, Mackay ordered the 19th Brigade, with his cavalry squadron, two artillery regiments and the Northumberland Fusiliers to advance to Tobruk. Reconnaissance parties moved forward on the morning of the 6th and established touch with the British armoured force astride the main road, and in the evening the main infantry column advanced, being carried in trucks of the 4th New Zealand Motor Transport Company. Before midday on the 7th the infantry had deployed opposite the eastern face of the Tobruk defences, the 2/4th Battalion on the right with its right flank about 1,000 yards from the coast, the 2/8th in the centre and the 2/11th on the left. There they came under sharp artillery fire, the enemy using air-burst shells. On the night of the 8th the three battalions of the 19th Brigade moved forward until the 2/4th was on the western bank of the Wadi Sidi Belgassem; that night a patrol of the 2/11th reached the anti-tank ditch in front of the Italian posts.

At Tobruk as at Bardia the flat hard floor of the desert slopes down towards the coast in a series of low escarpments lying from east to west. The coast itself is broken by deep north-south ravines two to four miles in length and so close to one another that the intervening land is often a mere ridge. Near Tobruk the Bardia road, skirting the ends of these coastal wadis, enters the fortress area about two miles and a half from the sea. Except for scattered clumps of camel bush the flat desert is bare of vegetation though near the mouths of some wadis a few palm trees grow.

As at Bardia the Italian defences consisted of a semicircle of concreted underground posts behind barbed wire entanglements five feet high. Outside this was an uncompleted anti-tank ditch; patrols were to discover that for four miles east of the El Adem road it was very shallow and on the western face of the defences there was no ditch at all, though a deep wadi served the purpose. Again the posts were two deep, each inner post being midway between two outer posts, and each outer post protected by its own anti-tank ditch and wire. The outer posts were generally 600 to 800 yards apart and the inner line 500 yards behind the outer. Whereas there were eighty posts along the seventeen-mile perimeter at Bardia there were 128 along the thirty-mile front at Tobruk. Thus, as long as the armoured division could fend off the Italian forces to the west—and so far the Italian commanders had seldom attempted a counter-attack—the task of the Australian division at Tobruk might be easier than at Bardia the line being longer and the garrison smaller.

But the attack could not be launched immediately, because it would take at least a week to bring up enough ammunition and other supplies to ensure success, and O'Connor would not risk his lightly-armoured tanks against the Italian guns and mines lest the consequent casualties rob him of his already-dwindling mobile striking force which would be needed



British 'I' tanks moving up to Tobruk, January 1941.

(Australian War Memorial photo)



(Australian War Memorial photo)

Tobruk: Brigadiers A. S. Allen and L. J. Morshead.

later.[5] The destruction of the isolated garrison would again have to be carried out by the infantry, with the support of the greatly-reduced battalion of heavy tanks.

The advance to Tobruk had been fast enough to outstrip a rabble of Italians who had escaped from Bardia and set out to walk to the next fortress, marching by night and hiding in the coastal wadis by day. Between the 7th and 10th, for example, engineers of the 2/8th Field Company at work behind the 19th Brigade collected twelve Italian officers and 650 men. The 17th Brigade, in reserve from 10th to 17th January, was given the task of systematically searching the wadis, and there found more fugitives. Others were rounded up by Bedouins sheltering their flocks in the wadis. They stripped the Italians of their weapons and any other useful possessions they carried and, having no more use for them, marched them to Australian posts along the main road, and particularly to a conspicuous road house near Gambut where No. 3 Squadron R.A.A.F. had its headquarters. As late as 9th January the 2/4th collected in the Wadi Ueddan twenty-nine prisoners who, having walked seventy miles, were only a mile short of the imagined safety of the Tobruk posts. On the following day patrols of the 17th Brigade brought in fifty-three Italians, and on the 12th January five more. These last said that they had left Bardia two days after the battle ended.[6]

The campaign was going so well that senior officers became worried by signs of what Mackay described as a "picnic spirit". In a sharp message to the units he said: "Civilianism is beginning to break out", and he complained of "promiscuous firing of rifles and exploding of bombs", of "dressing in articles of Italian uniform like clowns and not like soldiers", of "collecting of dogs and looking after dogs instead of men" and of "fraternisation with prisoners." "We must keep our heads and maintain perspective and poise," he concluded. "If we do not we shall quickly lose efficiency and slip to the level of the foe we are hoping to defeat."[7]

Mackay was a stern moralist, intolerant of any lapse from the highest standards of soldierly conduct. It was true that the men were experimenting and sometimes played dangerously with captured weapons and vehicles (one battalion complained of its neighbour's "over-enthusiastic tendency to shoot gazelles"), but on the other hand it was also true that this very curiosity increased the men's knowledge of unfamiliar equipment and added to their armoury, because they were now using a useful quantity of

[5] Only fifty medium tanks in the division were in working order.

[6] Although it was not known at the time Gen Bergonzoli, who had commanded the Bardia garrison, was among those who walked from Bardia to Tobruk. There was no role for another corps commander in Tobruk, and he was flown out. Gen Tellera, commanding the *Tenth Army*, and his staff also departed from Tobruk, thus leaving Gen Petassi Manella of *XXII Corps* in command. Both here and later closer liaison between the cavalry force (the armoured division) and the infantry (the 6th Australian) would certainly have resulted in more thorough mopping-up. As it was, between the enthusiastic speeding westward of the armoured division and the more cumbersome movement of the infantry it was nobody's task to mop-up the country each side of the road. One battalion could have done it, and the fault undoubtedly lies with the Australian rather than the British formation.

[7] In this period unit orders frequently contained instructions similar to those Mackay had given to the force as a whole. In orders on 10 Jan one small unit said: " 'Clowning' in the form of discharging enemy firearms, hand grenades, showing-off with captured vehicles, etc. is looked on in a serious light and offenders will be punished"; and, on 14 Jan: "Stray bullets are interfering with patrols; shooting of game in divisional area will cease."

captured gear, including even mortars and anti-tank guns. There had been some waggish wearing of Italian clothing, but the reason that, in some companies, half the men were wearing Italian boots, and Italian groundsheets were prized, was that the men had worn out their own boots and the light Italian groundsheet served as a useful tent.

The men (as Mackay and his staff were aware) were living under extremely arduous conditions. They slept in holes dug in the stony ground, and these were their only protection against intermittent shell fire and the wind and dust. As at Bardia the thermos bombs which the Italians had scattered round the perimeter were a constant anxiety. The nights were not so cold as at Bardia, but the dust storms were far more severe. Water was rationed to half a gallon a man daily, until a supply of washing water was found at El Adem and each man was allowed three-quarters of a gallon a day for washing himself and his clothing.[8] Mess and kitchen gear had to be cleaned with sand. No "canteen goods" were available to vary the monotonous food, but there was tobacco and some units had supplies of captured tinned tomato and tinned veal. "Desert sores" began to appear on hands and faces. Fleas and, in a few units, lice picked up in the ill-kept Italian dugouts at Bardia were a minor torment. In these weeks a few men chose to wound themselves rather than continue to endure the discomforts and dangers.

The 16th Brigade went into the line on the left of the 19th on the night of the 9th-10th January. Each night, on the five-battalion front[9] extending nine miles from the coast to the neighbourhood of the El Adem road (whence the 7th Armoured Division took over) each battalion would send out one or two patrols to find and measure the anti-tank ditch or perhaps to creep beyond it to the wire entanglements. Sometimes the Italians would see the scouts (the moon was full on 13th January and rose at 5.50 p.m.) and a patrol might have to lie still under furious fire for half an hour before making its way home.

On the 9th Brigadier Robertson ordered Lieut-Colonel Dougherty of the 2/4th Battalion to advance by night from the Wadi Belgassem, try to penetrate the defences with strong fighting patrols and, if he succeeded, follow up with the remainder of the battalion, except one company left in reserve. However, after a night advance over very rough country, the fighting patrols were halted by very heavy fire as they approached the Wadi Zeitun on whose far bank were the Italian posts.

On the night of the 11th-12th a patrol of the 2/1st, led by Lieutenant Rogers, stalking cautiously towards the ditch near the left of the line, set off some booby traps, and Rogers and one of his men, Private Pearson,[1] were wounded. The survivors managed to carry the wounded men off under cover of a scurry of dust before an Italian patrol reached them, but this incident revealed a hazard not present at Bardia. The following

[8] The cooks were allowed an additional half gallon a man a day for cooking.

[9] Robertson had his three battalions in the line so that all would gain the maximum experience in patrolling. Allen held one of his three more-experienced battalions in reserve.

[1] Pte S. I. Pearson, NX4341; 2/1 Bn. Law student; b. Sydney, 19 May 1915.

night a patrol from the neighbouring battalion, the 2/3rd, also ran into booby traps. Corporals Best[2] and Doyle[3] were scouting 300 yards ahead of twenty men commanded by Lieutenant Gibbins[4] when there was an explosion and they were hit in the legs. There was much artillery fire at the time and the main body of the patrol did not know that anything was amiss until they heard Best calling for help. Two men crept forward and the wounded men were carried back 1,200 yards on stretchers improvised by slinging coats over rifles. The following night a party of engineers went out with a patrol of the 2/3rd to find the traps and discover how they worked. They found a line of booby traps about 100 yards in front of the anti-tank ditch, the traps ten feet apart and joined by a green trip wire six inches above the ground. When kicked, the trip wire pulled a trigger and detonated an explosive in a cannister measuring ten inches by



Italian booby traps.

two and a half and filled with small fragments of metal. The engineers brought some of these booby traps back and discovered that they could be made safe—"deloused" was a favourite term—by putting a small nail through a hole in the firing pin to keep it in place and then removing the firing cap.[5]

On the night of the 15th-16th Lieutenant Eckersley[6] of the 2/8th Field Company led a three-man patrol against the Italian line opposite the 2/11th Battalion. When they reached the anti-tank ditch there was a series of explosions and they believed that they were being attacked with grenades. Sapper Kendrick[7] was wounded mortally; the other three, though wounded, managed to get back. After the battle Kendrick's body was found and there were signs that the damage had been caused not by grenades but booby traps.

Thenceforward leading scouts would move forward cautiously as they neared the ditch, holding in front of them a thin stick with which to feel the trip wire without setting off the traps. Patrols discovered a continuous

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[2] Cpl I. K. Best, NX4472; 2/3 Bn. Surveyor's assistant; of Goulburn, NSW; b. Goulburn, 19 Aug 1914.

[3] Cpl V. L. Doyle, NX5030; 2/3 Bn. Greengrocer; of Sydney; b. Sydney, 8 Sep 1915.

[4] Capt G. W. Gibbins, NX12474; 2/3 Bn. Contractor; of Grafton, NSW; b. Sydney, 24 Jun 1916.

[5] Thereafter the mines and booby traps were explored by engineer parties led by Lt S. B. Cann and Sgt V. E. Nash (of Glebe, NSW), the ditch by Lt B. F. Dawson and his section, the wire by Lt W. A. Davey and his section. Thus each of the three sections of Maj A. G. Torr's company of engineers specialised when on patrol in that part of the Italian defences with which it would have to deal on the night of the attack.

[6] Lt P. J. Eckersley, VX15217; 2/8 Fd Coy. Engineer; of Melbourne; b. Melbourne, 29 Nov 1913.

[7] Spr A. G. Kendrick, VX29613; 2/8 Fd Coy. Carpenter; of Albury, NSW; b. Dulwich Hill, NSW, 3 Sep 1917. Died of wounds 16 Jan 1941.

line of these devices for 6,000 yards along the front, including the area of Posts 55 and 57 where the anti-tank ditch was shallow. Finally, on the night of 15th-16th January, two engineer lieutenants, Beckingsale[8] and Gilmour,[9] were sent to plot accurately the position of these posts, the wire, the ditch and the minefield in the vicinity. They spent the night making careful measurements and taking bearings.

These patrols were an outcome of a decision announced to the brigade commanders at a conference on 13th January to attack near Post 57. Two days earlier Mackay and Berryman had indicated a special interest in the Bir el Azazi area. Allen had been ordered to extend his line to the left, and to move it forward to about 3,000 yards from the perimeter, with a defended locality about 1,000 yards from the enemy's posts near Bir el Azazi. Both forward brigades were instructed to explode two bangalore torpedoes in the Italian wire each night, but not to do so near Post 57. At the same time, also to deceive and weary the enemy, five-minute bombardments were fired at various parts of the Italian line each night.

General O'Connor was anxious to use his armoured division to advance to Mechili. The Support Group now occupied a line from Acroma to the sea with the 4th Armoured Brigade protecting its right and the left of the 6th Division; the 7th Armoured Brigade and the 11th Hussars guarded against an enemy approach from the west along either the northern or the southern road. From 15th January onwards armoured patrols had found Bomba and Tmimi unoccupied and had approached Mechili which appeared to be occupied by a force about 400 strong. When it became apparent that supplies and fuel needed for a move against Mechili could not be assembled before 20th January, and in response to Mackay's request that the armoured division should press in on Tobruk from the west while he attacked in the south and that its artillery should assist in the bombardment, O'Connor agreed to postpone the advance on Mechili until after the attack. Henceforward, the commanders believed, the speed and extent of the advance would be governed less by the resistance of the enemy than by the corps' ability to keep its vehicles in working order and to bring supplies forward. Spare parts for vehicles of all kinds were short, and the Australian trucks were being maintained by a process which Mackay named "cannibalisation". Within a few hours of a vehicle breaking down and being abandoned by the road it would be dismantled by passing drivers, one removing a wheel, another a spring, another a piston and so on until only a skeleton remained. It was a rough-and-ready system and was sharply criticised by staff officers who were unaware of the extent of the shortage, of the high pressure under which drivers were working, and the degree to which the force was then compelled to rely on captured transport.

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[8] Capt G. Beckingsale, MC, VX207; 2/2 Fd Coy. Engineer; of Melbourne; b. Melbourne, 21 Nov 1916.

[9] Maj P. R. Gilmour, MC, VX246; 2/2 Fd Coy and OC 2/1 Fd Coy 1943-45. Civil Engineer; of Melbourne; b. Melbourne, 10 May 1911.

Again General O'Connor's plan for the capture of the fortress was that the armoured division should demonstrate but not commit itself while the infantry division attacked, split the Italian perimeter and fanned out within it. When the infantry had taken Tobruk, the armour, its dwindling strength conserved, could thrust towards Mechili and farther west, the infantry division making the best speed it could on the coastal flank. After discussions with O'Connor and his staff, whose headquarters had been at Gambut since the 7th, and with Creagh of the armoured division, Mackay assembled his brigadiers and Jerram of the 7th Royal Tanks on 17th January, and outlined a plan of attack. The first move, he said, would be to form a bridgehead so that the tanks could enter the perimeter. He wished to "bite deeply into the defences and get at the enemy artillery early" (failure to do this had been one cause of the local set-back at Bardia). At the same time he wished to capture the sectors to the east of the tank bridgehead in order to make additional entrances on that flank, and particularly along the main road.

Again, he said, one battalion of the 16th Brigade would establish the bridgehead. It would then swing west, supported by a troop of tanks. A second battalion, with more tanks, would capture the perimeter up to the Bardia road, and the third, with tanks and cavalry carriers, would penetrate deeply and overcome a number of field and anti-tank batteries in the area between the Bardia and El Adem roads. The 17th Brigade was to mop up the eastern sector, and the 19th Brigade to move into the perimeter through the 16th and advance northward deep into the fortress area. At the end of the day, the 19th Brigade was to be on the forward slope of the escarpment overlooking Tobruk with the 17th on its right and the 16th facing west on its left. General O'Connor had decided that the role of the armoured division would be to demonstrate against the western half of the defences, where, for four days before the attack opened, the Support Group would carry out a program of harassing fire with artillery and small arms. At this conference Jerram spoke frankly about the employment of his tanks at Bardia, saying that some had been improperly used to carry out wounded and for other non-essential tasks and this had hampered their use in support of the 17th Brigade.

Thus, in its main features, the plan resembled that employed at Bardia —penetration of the line by a dawn attack on a small front to open a gate through which infantry and tanks could enter and fan out within the Italian area; both plans provided for pressure on the enemy's left flank in order to suggest that attack was to come from that direction; a stealthy night movement to the left of most of the artillery on the eve of the attack. The point of attack was to be at the junction of two sectors (as revealed on captured maps) in the hope that, in the early stages, the enemy commander, receiving reports that two sectors were under attack, would conclude that the advance was on a wider front than was actually so.

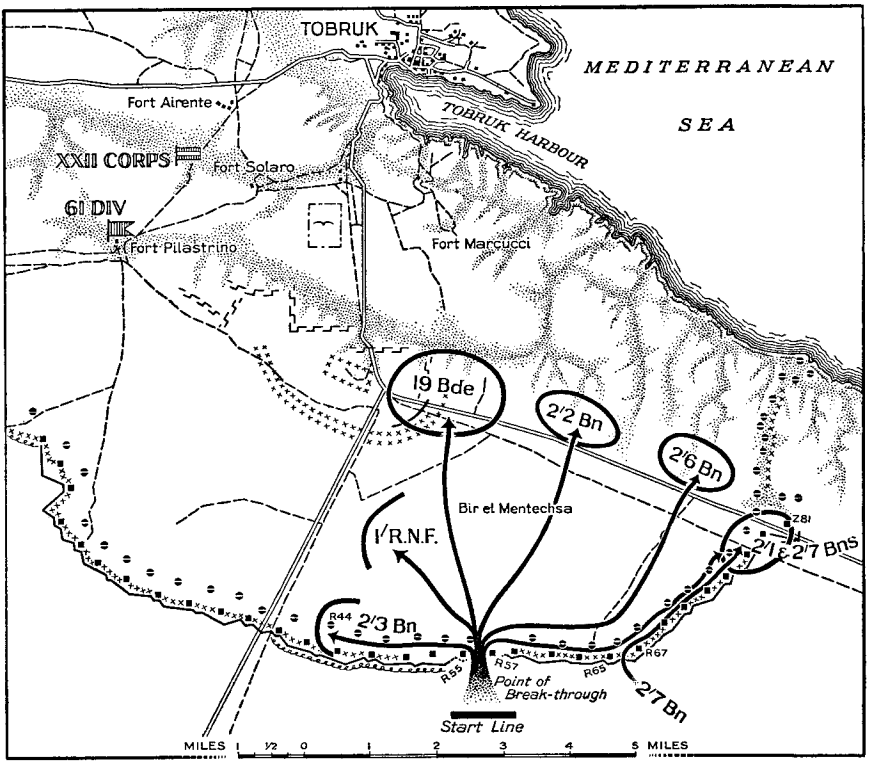
General O'Connor had instructed General Mackay that the attack be made on the 20th, but Brigadier Allen asked that it be postponed until the 21st to allow him more time for his preparations and because an additional

day might enable the 7th Royal Tanks to put more of their tanks in working order—on the 17th Jerram could promise that only thirteen of them would be fit for action on the 18th. O'Connor agreed to the postponement, although for two main reasons he was anxious to press on: firstly, because fresh Italian divisions were believed to be arriving at Tripoli and secondly, because he knew that plans were being made to send reinforcements to Greece, and it was likely that this venture would reduce the already inadequate trickle of supplies to the desert force.

The estimate of the Tobruk garrison was not materially altered between the 5th and the 20th: 25,000 troops, including the *61st (Sirte) Division,* the artillery regiment of the *17th (Pavia) Division* and two additional battalions; 232 heavy, medium and field guns, 48 heavy anti-aircraft guns, 24 anti-tank guns, 25 medium and 45 light tanks. It was believed that the headquarters of the *17th* and *27th (Brescia) Divisions* were at Derna and the *60th Division* was assembling there; at Mechili was a brigade of some 60 medium tanks. Most of the *17th Division* was believed to be at Benghazi and the other formations remaining in Tripolitania—*25th (Bologna)* and *55th* (*Savona*) *Divisions* were believed to be moving towards Cyrenaica. Thus, unless the advance was hastened, there might soon be four fresh enemy divisions and an armoured brigade deployed between Derna and the Gulf of Sirte. Meanwhile O'Connor's armoured strength was declining. On 16th January there were only 69 cruiser, 126 light, and 12 infantry tanks ready for action. Between 17th and 20th January the 3rd and 7th Hussars and 1st and 2nd Royal Tanks were brought up to strength by taking over the tanks of the 8th Hussars and 6th Royal Tanks, whose men were withdrawn from the forward zone, again reducing each armoured brigade to two instead of three regiments.

Detailed orders for the attack provided that the following units would be added to Allen's command in the initial stage: 2/6th Battalion, 1/Northumberland Fusiliers (minus one company), three troops of the 6th Cavalry, "J" Battery Royal Horse Artillery, and the 2/1st Field Company. Before moonrise (1.10 a.m.) engineers would move forward and disarm the anti-personnel mines on a front of 800 yards. At 5.40 the artillery barrage would begin and the 2/3rd Battalion with the 2/1st Field Company would cross a start-line 1,000 yards from the Italian posts. The engineers, with the infantry pioneers, would blow holes in the enemy's wire and begin making five lanes for vehicles over the ditch and through the wire. At 6.5 a.m., when the barrage lifted, the 2/3rd would advance and take Posts 57, 55, 56, 54 and 59. Thenceforward, at short intervals, tanks, cavalry, artillery and infantry would advance through the gap until, within three hours, eight battalions, all the tanks and cavalry and several troops of artillery would be within the perimeter. Thus, at 6.45 a.m., one troop of tanks would pass over the crossings in the anti-tank ditch to support the 2/3rd in an advance westward along the perimeter posts, the 2/1st Battalion would enter and, with a second troop of tanks, would march along the perimeter to the right. Then the 2/2nd Battalion would cross the ditch, and, with three troops of tanks, would advance

north-east, north and north-west to capture the Italian batteries on the flat ground between the Bardia and El Adem roads. By 7.30 the 2/6th Battalion, machine-gunners, cavalry and artillery would be fanning out within the perimeter; and at 7.55 the 19th Brigade would enter to thrust northwards quickly, occupy the edge of the escarpment leading down to the town and be ready to exploit westwards.



The plan of attack.

Again Savige's brigade was to be split up. The 2/6th would be under Allen's command in the early stages[1]; the 2/7th was to enter the perimeter and relieve the 2/1st on its objective, when it and the 2/6th would revert to Savige's command. His third battalion, the 2/5th, would be in support just south of the Bardia road. To enable Savige's battalions to be thus concentrated nearer the battle, the right of the Australian line was left occupied only by a company of machine-gunners and a few small detachments of the 2/5th, whose task was to make much noise with machine-guns, rifles and captured mortars, to fire Very lights and generally to give the impression that the area was strongly held.

Thus the role given to each brigade resembled that allotted in the earlier battle. To Allen's rugged 16th which had been longest in the Middle East

[1] This was done at Savige's own suggestion after he had been informed of the divisional plan.

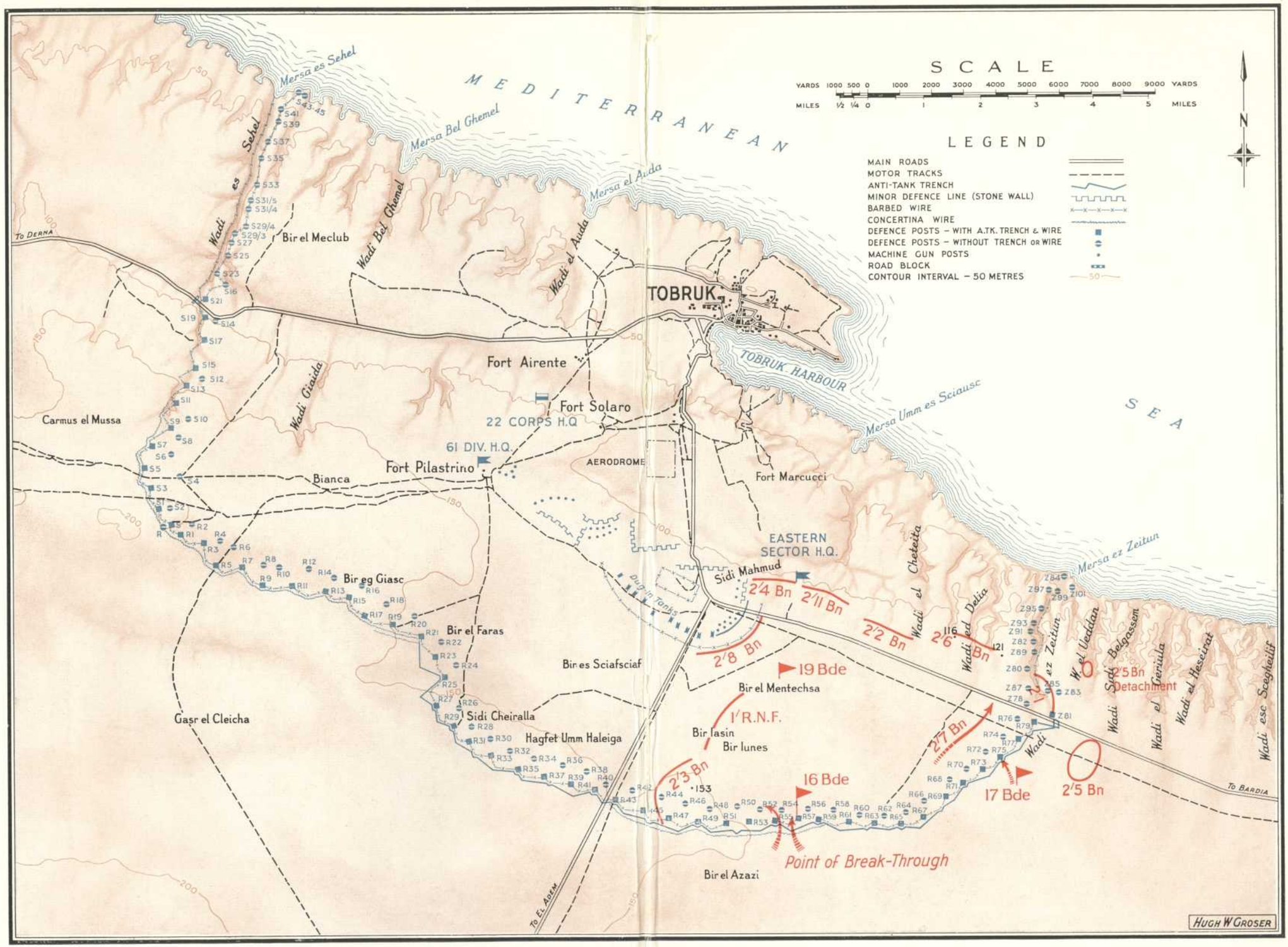
was again given the task of punching a hole in the Italian line; Robertson's 19th was to move fast and far and deliver a final blow; Savige's again was to be used piece-meal, its component parts dispersed over a wide area.

For the coming battle Mackay, though he was weaker in infantry tanks, having eighteen as against twenty-eight at Bardia, had more artillery and an additional battalion of English machine-gunners—the 1/Cheshire. As well as his own two field regiments, the 2/1st and 2/2nd, plus one battery of the newly-arrived 2/3rd, he had one British medium regiment (the 7th) and a battery of another (the 64th), one field regiment (the 51st), the 104th and one battery of the 4th Royal Horse Artillery. From 5.40 a.m. eighty-eight guns of various calibres would concentrate on the enemy posts from 52 to 59 on a front of less than 2,500 yards. At 6.5 a.m. the fire would lift from Posts 55, 57 and 59 while the infantry attacked them, and concentrate on 53 and the posts in the inner line. After 6.20 a.m., for more than an hour some of the guns would fire on the Italian artillery, some would form a box of fire round the bridgehead and some would place a moving barrage in front of the infantry.

The advance by the 19th Brigade was to have formidable artillery support (lest the set-back to the second phase of the battle at Bardia be repeated). It would be assisted by the fire of fifty-two 25-pounders, sixteen 4.5-inch guns, two 60-pounders and eight 6-inch howitzers. Sixty-six of these guns would provide a preliminary barrage from 8.20 to 8.35; and from 8.20 until 9.35 fire was to be brought down on Italian battery positions and posts ahead and on the flanks. Each battalion of this brigade was to be accompanied by an observer from a supporting field regiment (or, in the case of the 2/8th, from "F" Battery, Royal Horse Artillery) so that fire could be concentrated on new-found targets. With the help of captured maps, aerial photographs and flash-spotting (taking bearings on the flashes of enemy guns and recording the time of flight of their shells) Brigadier Herring's gunners had fixed the positions of the Italian batteries to ensure that accurate fire could be brought down on them on the critical day.

On the two nights before the attack squadrons of Wellingtons and Blenheims, which raided Tobruk regularly, dropped a total of twenty tons of bombs on the fortress. During the day of the attack Blenheim bombers of three squadrons were to make constant sorties over the enemy-held areas. Based at Gambut near O'Connor's headquarters and directly under his command were No. 200 (Army Co-operation) Squadron, a flight of No. 6 (Army Co-operation) Squadron and No. 3 Squadron R.A.A.F., which were to give close support.

As one consequence of the postponement of the attack not only were eighteen infantry tanks (not thirteen as had been feared) in working order on the 21st, but a small reinforcement of the division's fighting vehicles came from another quarter. Before Bardia had been taken O'Connor had ordered that "A" Squadron of the 6th Australian Cavalry should equip itself with some captured Italian tanks. With great labour, because the Diesel engines of these vehicles were unfamiliar, sixteen



The attack on Tobruk. Situation at 11 a.m. 21st January

medium ("M11" and "M13") tanks, each armed with a light gun and machine-guns, were put into working order and brought forward, and the single squadron, reinforced with men from the carrier platoons of infantry battalions, was expanded into three, one with six tanks and two each with nine carriers.[2]

An accident on the night of the 17th had made it additionally fortunate that Allen obtained a postponement. His newly-appointed brigade major, Knights,[3] with Captain Hassett,[4] adjutant of the 2/3rd, and other officers, and with Lieutenant Bamford's[5] platoon of the 2/3rd to protect them, had gone forward to mark a starting-line for the attack. The desert was almost featureless and, as at Bardia, the only way to ensure that the start-line was the correct distance from the objective was to find the Italian wire and carefully pace a line at right angles from it. After a long, stealthy march in the darkness all but two of Bamford's men were left behind and they and the officers moved forward towards the Italian line. When they thought that they were still 300 yards from the booby traps there was a flash and two explosions; in quick succession, Knights, Hassett, Bamford and the two scouts (Privates Armstrong[6] and Smith[7]) were wounded, leaving only three of the party unhurt. The wounded were brought in, but the start-line remained unlaid.

The following day (the 18th) Major Campbell, Allen's brigade major at Bardia, and now on Mackay's staff, returned to the brigade to lead the final patrols and lay out the starting-line as he had done at Bardia. On the night of the 18th-19th he went forward with three engineers under Sergeant Johnston who had taken charge of the bangalore party at Bardia and blown gaps in the wire for the infantry and tanks to pass through. When these four had marched by compass to within about 300 yards of the anti-tank ditch opposite Post 57, Campbell instructed the engineers to feel for the booby-trap string. After probing forward for about 150 yards the string was found and some traps disarmed without mishap. The patrol advanced to the ditch and along it to a point half way between Posts 55 and 57 (the gateways of the intended breach). Thence Campbell led the party back into no-man's land, broke the line of booby traps again and moved 1,000 yards from the perimeter. Pieces of rifle-cleaning flannel were tied to a camel bush there to mark the centre of the start-line, and thence they moved back on a compass bearing for 2,000 yards, marking a bush every twenty-five yards or so with flannelette, until they reached the area chosen for the assembly of the assaulting force. There was no time to

[2] The squadrons were named "Dingo", "Rabbit" and "Wombat". A white kangaroo (the sign of the 6th Division) was painted on each side of the tanks, very large because of the danger that gunners now familiar with the outlines of Italian tanks might shoot at them.

[3] Maj-Gen R. W. Knights, CBE, VX78. 2/7 Bn, BM 16 Bde, and GSO1 (Staff duties) LHQ 1943-45. Regular soldier; of Melbourne; b. Canberra, 24 Jun 1912.

[4] Lt-Col F. G. Hassett, DSO, OBE, NX322. 2/3 Bn and GSO1 3 Div 1945. CO 3 Bn RAR, Korea, 1951. Regular soldier; of Clovelly, NSW; b. Sydney, 11 Apr 1918.

[5] Capt H. O. Bamford, NX543; 2/3 Bn. Baker; of Bowral, NSW; b. Moss Vale, NSW, 27 Jun 1919.

[6] Pte R. A. Armstrong, NX4542; 2/3 Bn. Labourer; of Bowral, NSW; b. Marulan, NSW, 30 Mar 1905.

[7] Pte A. J. Smith, NX4821; 2/3 Bn. Seasonal worker; b. Barroga, NSW, 26 Nov 1909.

delay as they had to be well away from the perimeter before the moon rose about 11 p.m. Although the Italians were unusually alert and fired bursts of machine-gun fire across no-man's land they did not discover this vital patrol.

On 18th January the wind had blown so fiercely that it would pick up empty petrol tins and bowl them along, and dust made it impossible to see more than a few feet. On the 19th the dust was still thick but the 20th was clear and sunny. That night the 19th Brigade which had been relieved in the eastern sector by the 17th Brigade and had a day of rest and bathing, was concentrated east of the El Adem road, the 2/6th Battalion was moved in trucks to join Allen's brigade, and the 2/5th moved to its area south of the Bardia road. The three battalions of the 16th Brigade concentrated in the darkness south of the point where they were to break through.[8]

Early in the night one group after another set off in the cold starlight towards the Italian line. About 11 p.m. Campbell led a party forward to mark with tapes the 2,000-yard route from assembly area to the centre of the start-line. Captain Buckley's[9] company of the 2/2nd Battalion accompanied them to protect the start-line, when marked, against possible Italian patrols. A section of engineers, under Lieutenant Cann, followed, and passed the start-line to clear booby traps on an 800-yard frontage. Campbell's party and Cann's stealthily withdrew when they had done their jobs, leaving Buckley's company on guard.

The leading battalion, the 2/3rd, began to move forward from the assembly area at 3.30 a.m., with the engineers of the 2/1st Field Company who were to blow gaps in the wire and dig crossings in the ditch for the tanks to pass over. The engineers had been organised by Lieutenant Davey into five parties each of four of his own sappers and three men of the 2/3rd's pioneer platoon. Each party was given three bangalore torpedoes, two to use and one in reserve. Each torpedo was carried by two men, the seventh man in each team being an emergency. When, at 5.40, the guns opened fire and the leading platoons of the 2/3rd Battalion advanced from the start-line in single file, the engineers led the way, spaced so that they would meet the wire about fifty yards apart.

On the right of the line as it reached a point a few yards from the ditch there was a vivid flash and a series of explosions. Evidently men on that flank had veered too far to the right and the trip wire of a group of booby traps had been kicked.[1] "It was quite a beautiful sight," said one of the infantrymen afterwards. "In the flash you could see twenty or more men peeling back like a flower opening." Three men were killed and

[8] Late on the evening of the 20th Colonel England of the 2/3rd appealed to his brigade headquarters for a last-minute alteration of the artillery plan to permit the concentration to remain on Post 59 for ten additional minutes (to 6.5 a.m.). Brig Herring agreed.

[9] Lt-Col A. A. Buckley, NX321. 2/2 Bn and CO 2/1 Pnr Bn 1944-45. Farmer; of Tamworth, NSW; b. Tamworth, 20 Jun 1916.

[1] It is possible that the traps were actually exploded by one of the two cavalry carriers under Lt T. P. Willsallen detailed to establish an observation post and report to divisional headquarters by radio telephone. In its effort to keep clear of the infantry, it moved well to the flank.

Lieutenant Donegan[2] and seventeen others wounded, leaving only a section (under Sergeant Sayers,[3] who was wounded but carried on) where there had been a platoon. One of the engineer parties was caught in this series of explosions (which they and the infantrymen at the time believed to be a salvo of shells from their own guns dropping short).[4] Sergeant Williams[5] of the engineers was killed and others were hit or thrown to the ground, including Private McBain,[6] one of the infantry pioneers who, though dazed and wounded, struggled to his feet and alone dragged a torpedo forward to the ditch. Thus the torpedoes were carried forward on time to the twenty-foot wide wire and were slid under it. Then sappers and pioneers moved back into the ditch except five sergeants or corporals who crouched at the wire ready to light the fuses.

Suddenly a bugler blew a call at one of the Italian posts perhaps 400 yards away. Some feared that this was giving the alarm, but the call died away and there was no sign that the enemy, only fifty yards away, realised that it was more than a routine bombardment. The leading infantrymen were now in the ditch or sheltering behind the parapet on the southern side, tense and eager to begin the assault. Davey fired a red Very light as a signal to his engineers to light the fuses and hurry back into the ditch. Men of the two leading companies heard four bangalore torpedoes explode; then a fifth loud explosion. Shells were bursting at rapid intervals, some very close to the wire; the noise and the darkness combined to create a sense of confusion. Davey was moving along the ditch urging the men to keep under cover but Lieutenant Dennis Williams, a high-spirited young platoon commander, shouted: "Go on you bastards" and began to climb out of the ditch. Major Abbot shouted: "Dennis, come back." The men heard and were in the ditch again when Colonel England appeared, saw some indecision, and shouted: "Go on, C Company!" Abbot hurried over to him and explained that the final bangalore had not exploded. "Come back, C Company," shouted England. The engineers had now gone forward and made sure that clean gaps had been blown in the wire—but only four of them—and Davey gave the word to advance. Then the men literally ran forward. At Bardia they had been laden with greatcoats, leather jerkins, and at least fifty pounds of equipment, rations and ammunition; now they wore only jerkins over their uniforms, and carried only their weapons and ammunition and a filled haversack.

The survivors of the platoon which had lost more than half of its men on the booby traps, led by Sergeant Sayers, were on top of Post 57 before the Italians had emerged from their shelters and took the post without a shot being fired at them. At Bardia leaders and men had learned the value

[2] Lt R. Donegan, NX34887; 2/3 Bn. Public servant; of Ascot Vale, Vic; b. Bendigo, Vic, 8 Aug 1905.

[3] Capt H. T. Sayers, MM, NX5605; 2/3 Bn. Gold dredger; of Wellington, NSW; b. Sydney, 15 Jan 1916.

[4] The nature of the wounds which the men received finally dispelled this belief.

[5] Sgt R. D. G. Williams, NX3577; 2/1 Fd Coy. Engineer; of Merrylands, NSW; b. Plymouth, Eng, 24 Feb 1905. Killed in action 21 Jan 1941.

[6] Sgt R. A. McBain, MM, NX4890; 2/3 Bn. Sawyer; of Wollongong, NSW; b. Wagga Wagga, NSW, 14 Apr 1916.

of speed and they moved so fast that here and there they surprised not only the Italians but their own neighbours. Within a few minutes some confused firing was taking place round Post 56 between two platoons of Abbot's company, each of which had overrun a forward post, a party from company headquarters under Sergeant-Major McGuinn[7] and, least dangerous, the Italians themselves, about forty of whom were captured there. A section from Williams' platoon advanced beyond the inner line and took more than 100 prisoners at a supporting position there. On the left Captain McDonald[8] attacked Posts 55 and 54. As Lieutenant MacDonald's[9] platoon approached 55, which was 200 yards from the gap in the wire through which they had come and proved difficult to find in the darkness, he shouted *"Mani alto!"* and one of his men fired. These Italians were ready for action, however, probably because of the minutes MacDonald had lost finding his way in the darkness, and they began firing with all the array of weapons each Italian post possessed. Immediately the Australians charged forward. The leaders, including MacDonald, Sergeant Hoddinott[1] and Corporal Foster[2] ran on to the post's anti-tank ditch, which was partly covered with thin planks, fell through them, and scrambled out again. Foster was killed and MacDonald wounded in the stomach but he (until he collapsed) and Hoddinott continued throwing grenades, until five more men in the platoon had been wounded by Italian fire. Hoddinott withdrew the twenty survivors about forty yards from the post, reorganised them and then led them forward again running as fast as they could and firing as they ran. When they reached the post they kicked aside the planks covering the manholes and dropped in grenade after grenade. Twenty-one dead Italians were counted in the post and three more were captured unwounded. The fight for Post 55 lasted more than half an hour.

Meanwhile Captain McDonald with Lieutenant Stanton's[3] platoon advanced to the inner post, 54. They found no sign of life there and had dropped in a few grenades when a runner arrived to report the set-back at 55. McDonald sent Stanton's platoon to help at 55, but it was still so dark and so difficult to keep direction that these men, after cutting their way through a belt of wire and stumbling into a ditch, discovered that they had cut their way right out of the perimeter and were in the main anti-tank ditch outside it. Post 54 was evidently cleared eventually by Abbot's company, which found every Italian still sheltering below ground except two who were dead—probably killed by Stanton's grenades.

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[7] Lt-Col L. McGuinn, MC, NX5413; 2/3 Bn. Articled law clerk; of Dubbo, NSW; b. Dubbo, 1 Apr 1911.

[8] Maj R. W. F. McDonald, MC, NX91; 2/3 Bn. Public servant; of Ulladulla, NSW; b. Rockhampton, Qld, 11 Sep 1910.

[9] Capt J. E. MacDonald, MC, NX34890; 2/3 Bn. Stock agent; of Wagga Wagga, NSW; b. Gundagai, NSW, 19 Jul 1912.

[1] Capt F. J. Hoddinott, MC, DCM, NX4784; 2/3 Bn. Station overseer; of Glen Innes, NSW; b. Tambo, Qld, 31 May 1914.

[2] Cpl C. J. A. Foster, NX4282; 2/3 Bn. Wine distiller; of Penshurst, NSW; b. Kogarah, NSW, 3 Jun 1914. Killed in action 21 Jan 1941.

[3] Lt-Col F. A. Stanton, NX4613; 2/3 Bn. Clerk; of Canberra; b. Concord, NSW, 18 Dec 1914.

By 6.45 the 2/3rd had taken five posts round the bridgehead and, in the grey dawn, the leading troop of tanks began to lumber through the ditch followed by the leading companies of the 2/1st Battalion. Again the flank of one of the leading companies ran into Italian booby traps which disabled almost every man in the outer platoon. In half an hour the battalion formed up and was advancing eastwards along the perimeter, Captain Hodge's company along the line of outer posts and Captain Miller's[4] along the inner, with the remaining rifle companies following to mop up. The attackers moved with the tanks at a steady two and a half miles an hour, subduing heavy fire at some posts, meeting no resistance at others. The tanks set the pace, and if the leading companies found a post slow to surrender they would drop grenades into it and leave the "mopping-up" to the following companies. At Post 74 they had to wait for the barrage to move on; thenceforward they were under fairly constant Italian artillery fire. At 9 o'clock they took Post 81, their objective, having advanced four miles and a half and taken twenty-one posts in two hours and a half. In their haste the rear companies failed to mop up one strong post—No. 62. The 2/6th Battalion, coming along about half an hour later, met heavy fire from this post, which contained the headquarters of the Bir Iunes sector. The Italians continued to fire despite bombardment by tanks and machine-guns until Lieutenant Clarke[5] and his pioneer platoon, advancing cautiously, poured a mixture of crude oil and kerosene into the post and lit it. Eleven dead men were found and thirty-five surrendered. It showed (wrote one diarist) "what could happen if the enemy was determined".

The 2/2nd Battalion, the next to move through the gap, had a difficult role, an improved version of that allotted to the unfortunate 2/5th at Bardia. It was to fan out after entering the perimeter, deal with three groups of Italian guns in the triangle formed by the perimeter, the Bardia road and the El Adem road, and thus remove a threat to the flank of the 19th Brigade which would follow. Mackay and Berryman, who realised the dangers, allotted Chilton of the 2/2nd a troop of tanks and arranged a series of artillery concentrations on successive battery positions timed to conform with the infantry's rate of advance. Chilton, an exceptionally careful planner who liked to leave nothing to chance, had seen to it that his men had been instructed in their task on sand-table models. One rifle company had to advance along each of three lines of guns, and each company therefore had an independent role; in the absence of wireless communications within the battalion (the only means of communication was by dispatch riders mounted on captured Italian motor-cycles) little control could be exercised by the commanding officer once the battle started.

By the time the 2/2nd entered, a cloud of dust whipped up by bursting shells and the wheels and caterpillar tracks of trucks and tanks hung over

[4] Lt-Col J. Miller, NX124. 2/1 Bn 1939-41; CO 2/31 Bn 1941-43. Hospital attendant; of Gladesville, NSW; b. Glebe, NSW, 17 Apr 1904. Died 14 Dec 1942.

[5] Capt F. D. Clarke, VX3964. 2/6 Bn 1939-42 and 57/60 Bn 1942-44. Clerk; of Adelaide; b. Adelaide, 20 Jun 1915.

the gap in the Italian line. Into this fog the 2/2nd moved at a fast walk with the tanks following, and marched north for 2,500 yards. In the dust and the dim light, tanks and infantry failed to link at their pre-arranged rendezvous within the perimeter, and each advanced independently. Because of accurate artillery fire on the Italian batteries, the support of the tanks, and because the Italian gunners seemed less cool and determined than at Bardia, resistance was relatively light.[6] Either tanks or infantry overran one battery after another until they had captured ten in all and, having marched and fought 3,500 yards in two hours and a half, tanks and infantry met on their objectives at 9.10 a.m., three of the infantry companies on the Bardia road, one on the El Adem road with, at that stage, a wide gap between.[7] The 2/6th, entering behind the 2/2nd, came in on their right and, by 11 a.m., had advanced across the Bardia road and were in position between Points 121 and 116. Next a force consisting of the 1/Northumberland Fusiliers (minus two companies) with three troops of cavalry and one of the 3rd Royal Horse Artillery entered, took over the ground held by the left companies of the 2/2nd Battalion and filled the gap between it and the 2/3rd. Soon after 11 a.m. the 2/7th, which had marched into the perimeter at 8.25 a.m., near Post 65, with a company of the Cheshire (machine-gunners) replaced the 2/1st at Posts 81 and 85 on the right flank of the 2/6th.

When we left the 2/3rd Battalion at the bridgehead its leading companies had taken five posts—59 to 55—and, with the engineers, had opened the gate for the tanks and the 2/1st and 2/2nd Battalions to enter. At this stage fresh companies, McGregor's on the right and Lieutenant Fulton's on the left,[8] with a troop of tanks, passed through the now-depleted companies that had fought for the bridgehead. The tanks helped to take Post 52, and then McGregor's company deployed and advanced north-north-west on a 700-yard front leaving the inner line of posts on their left. They moved forward without great opposition, capturing 300 Italians, until they were overlooking the El Adem road from relatively high ground, where they remained until the early afternoon sniping at Italian batteries on the opposite side of the road. Meanwhile Fulton's company which had one tank to support it quickly took Post 53. The tank then moved against the inner posts and the infantry took 51 and 49 alone.

Thence McDonald's company took over with two tanks to help it. At the next two posts the tanks subdued the Italian fire and the infantrymen, following close behind, threw in grenades or fired a few rounds from a Bren gun. If the Italians did not then climb out, their hands over their

[6] The 2/2nd had only fifteen casualties.

[7] Three signallers, K. R. Clift (of Bondi, NSW), W. A. Bruce (Cremorne, NSW) and R. D. McKeague had the task of following 2/2 Bn and laying a telephone line to it. This done they were to march left across the battlefield, find the forward company of the 2/3rd and lay a line thence to Allen's headquarters. Soon after leaving the 2/2nd the three men topped a rise slightly to the rear of an Italian battery and two machine-guns still firing on the advancing 2/3rd. The signallers stalked forward and attacked with a rifle, a pistol and grenades, knocked out the machine-gunners and caused some 60 Italians to surrender.

[8] Capt Ian Hutchison, the officer commanding this company, had been wounded near the starting-line and the only officers remaining were Fulton and two lieutenants, A. F. Thompson (of Epping, NSW) and E. J. B. Carter (Sydney) who had arrived with reinforcements a few days before.

heads, an infantryman jumped down into the post with a warning shout[9] to ferret the garrison to the surface, whereupon the loose planks covering the trenches flew apart and twenty or thirty Italians clambered out. At 9 a.m., McDonald, when nearing Post 45, came under accurate artillery fire from guns beyond the road. One shell broke the track of a tank; McDonald withdrew his men round Post 44 (which was his objective), and the infantry and damaged tank remained under intermittent fire from artillery and posts ahead for four hours.

While the battalions under Allen's command were fanning out, the 19th Brigade marched through the gap which they had made and drove deeper into the Italian position. It moved from its start-line some 5,000 yards within the perimeter at 8.40 a.m. The crust of the defence had been broken and in its first phase Robertson's advance went precisely according to plan. Behind the fire of seventy-eight guns from 25-pounders to 6-inch howitzers, the three battalions moved fast and in open order. The barrage advanced 200 yards each two minutes and the men had been schooled to keep close to it. On the right the 2/11th Battalion reached its objective on the top of the escarpment beyond the Bardia road without a casualty. As it neared the road, the 2/4th, which advanced with a detachment of the divisional cavalry on each flank and was forward of the other battalions, came under machine-gun fire from Italian positions near the road junction. Captain Pinniger,[1] commanding the left forward company, was hit and both his legs were broken, but he ordered stretcher bearers to carry him forward to catch up the battalion. They did so, but when they reached Dougherty's headquarters he ordered that Pinniger be taken back to the field ambulance. The Vickers guns with the battalion temporarily subdued the enemy fire and the battalion went on, captured the sector headquarters which was established in dugouts about 1,000 yards beyond the road and established itself on the upper shelf of the escarpment while patrols descended on to the next shelf.[2]

The fire from the left, however, hit the 2/8th Battalion far harder, and before the Victorians had reached the road it was apparent that any serious trouble encountered by the brigade would come from that quarter. Aerial photographs and captured maps had shown that an anti-tank obstacle had been thrown round the eastern side of the road junction and west of it was a strong group of batteries. The map suggested that the Italian commander, in preparation for a possible break-through east of the El Adem road, had begun a second line of defence protecting the road junction, his own headquarters at Fort Solaro, the sector headquarters at Fort Pilastrino and the town itself.

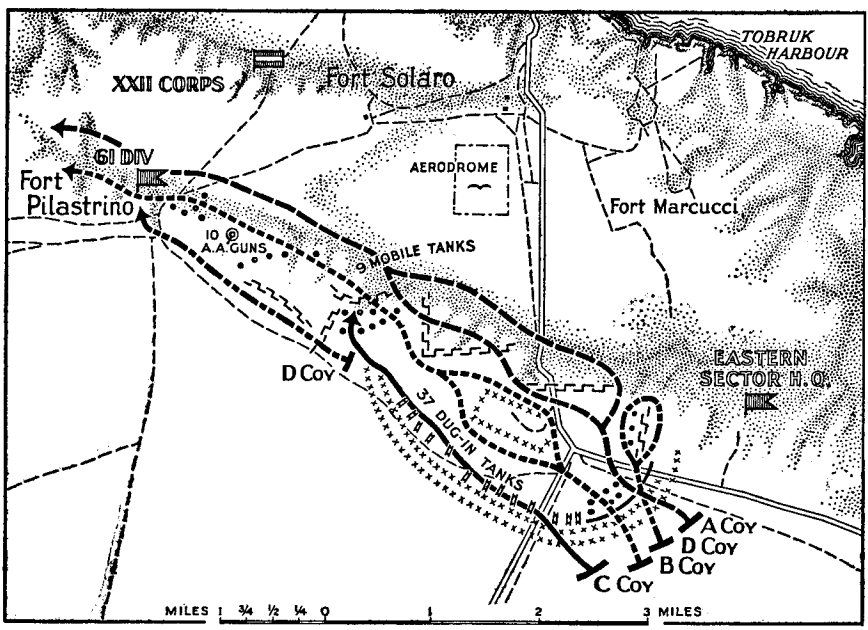
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[9] McDonald heard one man shout as he jumped into a post: "Right-o, bludgers, I'm coming for you!"

[1] Maj S. G. Pinniger, VX52. 2/4 Bn 1940-41; OC 10 Fd Coy 1942; CRE Torres Strait Force 1943-44; OC 41 Water Tpt Operating Coy 1944-45. Architect; of Melbourne; b. Stawell, Vic, 28 Apr 1913.

[2] In the advance Sgt H. L. Watts (Moree, NSW) and Pte S. M. Broinowski (Homebush, NSW) gallantly attacked and subdued a machine-gun post on the right flank.

The troop of cavalry with carriers and one tank which was leading the 2/8th on the left came under this fierce fire and answered it. Campbell's[3] "C" Company following behind swung left towards the fire while the other three rifle companies kept moving to the objective. At first Campbell thought that he was tackling a small group of machine-gun posts, but soon could see that he faced ten or more stationary tanks which had been dug into the ground and were firing with the twin machine-guns they carried in their turrets. The company lay waiting for an artillery concentration to be brought down on the tanks, but seeing a platoon from "D" Company (Smith's[4]), which had become split during the left wheel, going straight into the attack on the right so that artillery fire was impossible



The 2/8th Battalion advance on Fort Pilastrino, January 1941.

without endangering them, Campbell attacked too. There followed a series of fierce fights between the infantrymen with their small arms, anti-tank rifles and grenades and the Italian tank-blockhouses. Lieutenant Gately's[5] platoon took three of them, then lay and fired while Lieutenant Anderson's[6] platoon leap-frogged forward and overran another group. Lieutenant Russell's[7] platoon on their left fired two anti-tank rifles with

[3] Capt R. E. Campbell, VX330; 2/8 Bn. Sales manager; of Williamstown, Vic; b. Edinburgh, 30 Sep 1904. Killed in action 23 Jan 1941.

[4] Maj J. A. H. Smith, VX203; 2/8 Bn. Transport manager; of Horsham, Vic; b. Horsham, 15 Mar 1909.

[5] Capt J. C. Gately, MC, VX6568; 2/8 Bn. Grocer; of Albury, NSW; b. Brisbane, 11 Feb 1911.

[6] Lt H. V. Anderson, VX6594; 2/8 Bn. Printer; of Wangaratta, Vic; b. Longreach, Qld, 5 Jul 1917. Killed in action 21 Jan 1941.

[7] Lt A. C. Russell, VX6417; 2/8 Bn. Barrister and solicitor; of Benalla, Vic; b. Maffra, Vic, 21 Mar 1908.



(Imperial War Museum photo)

Infantrymen pause at a gap in the wire entanglements at Tobruk.



(Australian War Memorial photo)

Italian tanks captured at Bardia were manned by members of the 6th Cavalry Regiment during the operations at Tobruk.

good effect. Thence Gately and Anderson attacked in turns along the line of tanks, each fifty to 100 yards from the other, the line extending west for about 1,500 yards and evidently intended to meet attack from the south not the east.[8] In each fight the crews fought with determination, and did not give in until the attackers were at close quarters. Sergeant Burgess[9] ran forward to one of the tanks and was trying to heave up the lid to drop in a grenade when he was hit by several bullets. "His last effort before he died," wrote one diarist, "was to struggle to put the pin back and throw the grenade clear of his comrades." Fourteen tanks were stormed, few prisoners being taken, and the remaining eight surrendered. Captain Robertson[1] and Lieutenants Anderson and Russell were wounded, Anderson mortally; only one sergeant in the company remained unwounded when the fight was over.

The remaining two companies (Major McDonald[2] and Captain Coombes[3]), which had wheeled and were now in the centre of the battalion's advance, came under fire from dug-in tanks on the right of those Campbell's company had attacked and began to suffer casualties. They fired on the tanks until the Italians closed down their firing slits, and then they charged with bayonet and grenade. McDonald's company had overrun a large building near the road junction. Coombes' company crossed the El Adem road, captured a group of mobile tanks and reached the edge of the first escarpment leading down to Tobruk. Here they encountered a group of machine-guns in sangars. Lieutenant Phelan,[4] the impetuous leader of the carrier platoon, led some carriers round the right flank here and took a sand-bagged emplacement at pistol point while the rifle company, supported by skilfully-directed overhead fire from a platoon of the ubiquitous machine-gunners of the Northumberland Fusiliers, pressed on and took the remaining positions. Before the attack had lost its impetus the leading men had captured some concrete dugouts which were discovered to be an artillery headquarters and from which emerged General Umberto Berberis and his staff. Coombes' company had now taken more than 1,000 prisoners. The battalion had reached the edge of the escarpment from a point north of the road junction to a distance of two miles to the west. Coombes, his men having almost exhausted their ammunition, decided that he was dangerously far ahead of the company on his right and halted until a truck carrying 5,000 rounds reached him. The main body of Smith's company had followed this advance and run right into by-passed Italians who were just recovering their breath. It too had some hard fighting.

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[8] This was one of several indications that the Italians expected an attack on the left of the El Adem road (on the analogy of Bardia).

[9] Sgt M. J. Burgess, VX6313; 2/8 Bn. Flour mill packer; of Melbourne; b. Numurkah, Vic, 17 Mar 1915. Killed in action 21 Jan 1941.

[1] Lt-Col W. T. Robertson, MC, VX213; 2/8 Bn and GSO1 (Ops) 7 Div 1943-44. Student; of Melbourne; b. South Yarra, Vic, 2 Feb 1917.

[2] Lt-Col H. H. McDonald, VX49; 2/8 Bn and CO 15 Bn 1944-45. Furniture manufacturer; of Preston, Vic; b. Maryborough, Vic, 5 Oct 1905.

[3] Lt-Col C. J. A. Coombes, MC, VX55; 2/8 Bn and CO 47 Bn 1945. Policeman; of Northcote, Vic; b. Echuca, Vic, 23 Jan 1908.

[4] Capt F. I. Phelan, VX553; 2/8 Bn. Journalist; of Melbourne; b. Hobart, 17 Oct 1910.

As soon as the 2/8th became committed to this long fight Robertson decided to carry out the second phase of his advance—to exploit westward to Forts Pilastrino and Solaro. The 2/8th was to take Fort Pilastrino, the 2/4th Solaro, and the 2/11th to seize the escarpment overlooking Tobruk Harbour from the south. The renewed attack would begin behind artillery fire at 2 p.m.

Lieut-Colonel Mitchell of the 2/8th now divided his battalion into two groups: "A" and "B" Companies on the right under Major McDonald, and "C" and "D" ("D", which had been divided, was now concentrated on the right flank) on the left under Major Key.[5] The right column would move along the edge of the escarpment, the left over the flat ground with the road as its axis of advance, and both would thus converge on the Italian headquarters of Pilastrino.

The advance was being resumed when the line ran into a well-organised counter-attack by nine medium tanks followed by some hundreds of Italians on foot. The infantry fought back with anti-tank rifles and stopped several of them. Private Neall,[6] in Campbell's company on the left, knocked out the three leading tanks with an anti-tank rifle, causing the remaining six to circle defensively, but not before they had overrun a section of the company and forced it to surrender. The remainder of the company took shelter in such shallow trenches and dips as the country offered. Under sharp fire Private Passmore[7] also engaged enemy tanks with an anti-tank rifle and disabled some of them. Colonel Mitchell who was close to the forward troops and had some British anti-tank guns near by, sent them forward and they hit two more tanks, but the situation was still dangerous when two infantry tanks arrived. The Italians, seeing these formidable machines advancing, turned about and fled, and the entire front line of the battalion charged forward in pursuit. In the affray Captain Campbell, the very gallant leader of the company, was fatally wounded, and Lieutenant Van Citters,[8] a fine young Englishman who had brought his pioneers into the thick of the battle, was killed. Only Lieutenant Gately, one sergeant, one corporal and nineteen men then remained. With this handful Gately reported to Coombes and they became part of that company for the remainder of the battle.[9]

The other companies, too, were becoming seriously depleted and orders had now been given that fit men were not to be sent back with prisoners or wounded, but that the wounded were to be left where they fell, their position being marked by a rifle with bayonet fixed set upright in the ground beside them. Although the Italian counter-attack had been dis-

[5] Lt-Col A. S. Key, VX148. 2/8 Bn and CO 2/14 Bn 1942. Asst Sales manager; of Armadale, Vic; b. Hawthorn, Vic, 1 Jul 1906. Presumed died in 1943 while prisoner-of-war.

[6] Lt O. Z. Neall, DCM, VX9024; 2/8 Bn. Grazier; of Lake Mundi, Vic; b. Lake Mundi, 6 Feb 1908.

[7] Pte L. R. Passmore, DCM, VX19811; 2/8 Bn. Labourer; of Wangaratta, Vic; b. Rosedale, Vic, 3 Jul 1919.

[8] Lt S. Van Citters, VX547; 2/8 Bn. Woolbroker; of Melbourne; b. Ceylon, 6 Apr 1910. Killed in action 21 Jan 1941.

[9] When men who had become scattered or had been sent back with prisoners rejoined the company it numbered eighty-one, out of 134 who had gone into the battle. All the officers and sergeants but one had then been killed or wounded.

persed, the fire from front and flanks became hotter and Mitchell delayed further advance for about an hour, when it abated, probably because of the success of the 2/4th against the Italian artillery on the right flank.

Continuing the advance, McDonald's companies fought their way with Bren and grenade, under continuous artillery and mortar fire, from sangar to sangar along the edge of the escarpment. At one stone wall the Italians threw grenades until the last yard, then flung up their hands; and one threw a grenade from among his surrendering comrades and killed an Australian. A Bren gun was fired into the others killing twenty (according to one observer). In the advance Lieutenant Trevorrow[1] and Sergeant Duncan,[2] an outstanding leader, were wounded; two of the platoon commanders had bullet holes in their clothing or equipment. A battery of twelve guns was rushed and then, after "F" Battery of the Royal Horse Artillery, with a lucky shot, had hit the magazine of a specially troublesome battery of anti-aircraft guns and blown crews and guns to pieces, Coombes' company on the right and Smith's which had been advancing parallel to it on the left charged and entered the low white buildings of Fort Pilastrino, under fire from other Italian positions farther on. It proved to be not a headquarters but a collection of barrack buildings surrounded by a wall. On the right Captain Challen's[3] company moved forward and, in the dusk, a duel began between the infantrymen and Italian guns about 600 yards beyond Pilastrino. Some hours after darkness fell the firing ceased as though both sides were too weary to continue. The men of this battalion had marched twenty miles since 4.30 that morning and had fought their way for five of them against an enemy who outnumbered them greatly and resisted with unusual determination.[4]

It had been provided that as soon as the 19th Brigade had crossed its starting-line, the 2/2nd Battalion would come under the command of Robertson, whose battalions would then be between the 2/2nd and Allen's headquarters. Thus, as a preliminary to his afternoon attack, Robertson had ordered Chilton to move across the battlefield to cover the area on his left, where part of the 1/Northumberland Fusiliers was already in position.

At 10.20 a.m. Brigadier Savige had moved his headquarters forward to Post 75 but before doing so he had instructed Lieut-Colonel King[5] of the 2/5th to reconnoitre the area bounded by Posts 65 and 75 so as to be ready to lead his battalion within the perimeter as soon as possible. At 11.55 he ordered King to move into the perimeter but, because of wire-

[1] Lt R. W. Trevorrow, VX5258; 2/8 Bn; discharged 1942 and served Merchant Navy 1942-45. Cafe proprietor; of Rochester, Vic; b. Glenelg, SA, 19 Oct 1909.

[2] Capt W. N. Duncan, DCM, VX6589; 2/8 Bn. Deputy shire clerk; of Corowa, NSW; b. Benalla, Vic, 9 Aug 1913.

[3] Lt-Col H. B. Challen, MBE, VX138; 2/8 Bn and CO 2/14 Bn 1942-43. Manufacturer's agent; of Melbourne; b. Daylesford, Vic, 26 Nov 1906.

[4] Nine officers and ninety-five men of other ranks had been killed or wounded—the heaviest loss suffered by a single battalion at Bardia or Tobruk.

[5] Maj-Gen R. King, CBE, DSO, VX20315. CO 2/5 Bn 1941-42; Comd 16 Inf Bde 1943-45. Regular soldier; of Newcastle, NSW; b. Newcastle, 27 Aug 1897. Died 24 Sep 1959.

less defects, the message did not reach him until 1.15, when he began to advance. As the 2/5th was moving forward Savige received a delayed order from divisional headquarters that it was to enter the perimeter astride the Bardia road, advance, and come under Robertson's command. Its task would eventually be to protect Robertson's right rear. This entailed changing direction half right. Savige wrote afterwards:

> They were extended beautifully and moving at a steady rate under continuous shell fire with King leading in his car as he controlled the movement of his battalion . . . . Without halting a moment the whole battalion veered half right without bunching or losing a beat in their resolute and steady march. It was the most thrilling spectacle I ever saw in battle, and despite the enemy shell fire, they suffered two casualties only.

The Australian left wing was further strengthened when, soon after midday, Allen ordered the 2/1st to move west to Bir el Mentechsa where it would be in a position to extend or reinforce his right flank if need be. Thus during the afternoon seven of the nine battalions were on or in reserve to the western flank, leaving Savige with two battalions holding the eastern end of the Italian fortress.

Meanwhile, in accordance with the orders mentioned above, the advance of the 2/4th and 2/11th Battalions had also begun at 2 p.m. On the right the 2/11th Battalion, widely dispersed, moved north-west to the edge of the escarpment overlooking Tobruk harbour from the Wadi Umm es Sciausc on the right to the road on the left. Ahead of the infantry Lieutenant Mills had already taken some of the cavalry carriers to the edge of this escarpment and had fired on the cruiser *San Giorgio* which lay aground on the far side of the harbour and near the entrance. This fire brought no reply (though later the cruiser fired on the cavalry carriers as they crossed the aerodrome with the 2/4th).

On the left of the 2/11th the 2/4th marched west along the wide shelf between the first and second escarpment with the aerodrome and Fort Solaro as its objective. Robertson impressed upon Dougherty that he was particularly anxious to take Solaro and perhaps capture the commander of the Tobruk garrison there. Behind fire from guns of two regiments—the 2/3rd Australian and the 104th Royal Horse Artillery—and with two anti-tank guns travelling with the leading companies (Captain Conkey's[6] on the right and Captain Rolfe's[7] on the left) the battalion reached the road and crossed it without mishap. A group of Italian tanks approached from the left but were driven off by the anti-tank guns. On the aerodrome the leaders came under point-blank fire from anti-aircraft guns on their right, and halted. Dougherty, who was moving from company to company in a carrier, ordered the artillery to fire on these guns and then told Lieutenant Mackenzie[8] to send one platoon out on the right to take them,

[6] Maj H. S. Conkey, MC, NX154; 2/4 Bn. Butcher; of Cootamundra, NSW; b. Cootamundra, 21 Dec 1917.

[7] Capt C. B. N. Rolfe, NX43; 2/4 Bn and 17 Bde. Bank Clerk; of Hunters Hill, NSW; b. Adelaide, 21 Sep 1913. Killed in action 8 Aug 1943.

[8] Lt M. G. Mackenzie, NX12448; 2/4 Bn. Of Drummoyne, NSW; b. Hobart, 14 Dec 1907.

which they did. The leading companies, after a twenty-minute halt, moved on towards Solaro. As they neared the buildings Conkey saw six Italian trucks making off in the direction of Tobruk, whereupon he and Private Wright[9] mounted captured motor-cycles and sped forward to cut them off. They halted the trucks, but a machine-gun fired at them from a building on the outskirts of Solaro; Wright rode at it, hurled a grenade through the window, and established himself in this building—a kitchen—and fired on the fort. When the remainder of the company arrived they occupied the buildings (which did not deserve the pretentious name "Fort Solaro") and rounded up some 600 prisoners. It was evident, however, that the Italian headquarters were not there.

Rolfe's company on the left was being fired on from positions farther to the west and continued to advance towards them; and Dougherty, anxious to find the fortress headquarters before dark, sent McCarty's[1] company forward of Conkey's to deal with four machine-gun posts sited where the track from Airente to Pilastrino climbs the escarpment. McCarty's men subdued these posts by firing with anti-tank rifles, which at this stage the Australians were often using against sangars and gun positions because of the moral effect produced when the heavy bullets splintered the rocks. McCarty found that the posts he had taken surrounded the entrances to tunnels which housed what was evidently a large headquarters. The Australians began to drive the occupants from the tunnels as they had done from similar caves and dugouts here and at Bardia, when an Italian officer appeared and told McCarty in English that "the commander" was inside and would surrender only to an officer. He sent Lieutenant Copland[2] into the tunnel. Copland was led to an Italian general who asked: "Officer?" "Oui, officer," said Copland. Both saluted, and the general drew his pistol and handed it to Copland, while tears welled from his eyes. *"C'est la guerre,"* said Copland. *"Oui, c'est la guerre,"* said the general. This was General Petassi Manella, commander of the *XXII Corps* and the Tobruk garrison. Manella, "an old man, dignified and quiet, and very tired", his captors decided, with his chief of staff, General de Leone, and his artillery commander were led to Dougherty, who took them to brigade headquarters, making the journey in a captured gun tractor, the only available vehicle. Robertson had instructed Dougherty to advance to Fort Airente if it seemed feasible and necessary after he had taken the Italian headquarters. Dougherty now decided not to do so. His men were tired, he had taken the Italian commander, he had no tanks; he could not call up artillery fire because the artillery observer's wireless set was out of action, and he had 1,600 prisoners to guard.

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[9] Pte F. Wright, MM, NX5184; 2/4 Bn. Vineyard employee; of Colyton, NSW; b. Speer's Point, NSW, 5 Mar 1916.

[1] Lt-Col J. McCarty, MC, NX61; 2/4 Bn and CO 2/4 Pnr Bn 1942-45. Salesman; of Kensington, NSW; b. Tamworth, NSW, 31 May 1910.

[2] Maj J. S. Copland, NX164; 2/4 Bn. Assistant manager; of Sydney; b. Sunderland, Eng, 27 Mar 1904.

At brigade headquarters Brigadier Robertson demanded of Manella that he order his men to cease fighting, but the Italian refused to do so, saying that they had their orders to fight to a finish.

On the perimeter three miles to the south the 2/3rd was still meeting determined opposition. With the intention of breaking the deadlock at Post 45, England decided to reopen the attack on that flank on a three-company front at 1.30 p.m. and take the Italian posts for about a mile and a half beyond the El Adem road. A fresh troop of tanks was obtained and artillery support was organised. In the early afternoon the battalion moved forward, McGregor on the right reaching a line beyond the road. Sergeant Stone's[3] platoon of Abbot's company was sent wide to the right to deal with machine-gun fire from that direction and, as it breasted the rise north of Post 42, it came within sight of eighteen Italian field guns on the plain beyond. They were firing well over the heads of the advancing infantry, and before either side had recovered from its surprise British shells began to fall closely and accurately round the Italian guns. This combination of events—concentrated artillery fire and a line of infantrymen coolly advancing towards them (though there were now only a dozen or so men in the platoon)—convinced the Italians that they were beaten and they stopped firing. The handful of Australians collected prisoners at each of three batteries and from dugouts in the neighbourhood more and more Italians, probably technical troops, poured in until, when Abbot arrived in a carrier, giving a little added show of strength, there were several hundred either already herded or on their way towards the Australians waving white rags. Abbot, knowing how weak was his hold on the area, ordered that a grenade be exploded in the barrel of each gun lest the enemy should recapture them.

Meanwhile McDonald, on the perimeter, with two newly-arrived tanks, had taken Post 42. Here one of the tanks had to withdraw to refuel and the other's gun jammed, but the infantrymen kept the attack moving taking Post 43 and, after a ten-minute duel with grenades, 40, the first post beyond the road. At this point "A" Company took over. Fulton had been wounded and Warrant-Officer MacDougal assumed command of the company, handing his platoon to a corporal, Broadhead.[4] Post 41 was firing strongly, but, after an exchange of fire, MacDougal gave a loud shout and led the men in a 200-yard charge. The Italians fired and threw grenades until the Australians were standing above the post with MacDougal throwing grenades into the entrances.[5] By 3 p.m., Posts 39 and 36 had been taken by Abbot's company which now took up the

[3] Lt L. L. Stone, MM, NX5611; 2/3 Bn. Farm hand; of Wellington, NSW; b. Guernsey, Eng, 22 Sep 1911.

[4] S-Sgt A. Broadhead, NX4712; 2/3 Bn. Motor driver; of Cooma, NSW; b. Kiandra, NSW, 23 Jun 1912.

[5] In the fight Cpl S. F. Woolley (of Bexley, NSW) was killed and Lt A. F. Thompson and others were wounded. Pte G. W. de Teliga (of Maroubra, NSW), an adventurous Pole who had recently joined this battalion, insisted that the large blonde officer who emerged from this post was a German. However, any tall fair Italian was likely, at this stage, to be declared a German. Not far from this point another tall, fair Italian officer was captured, and was asserted to be a German. In fact he was a gentle young Italian priest.

advance (leaving MacDougal at Post 40, McDonald forward of Post 38). From 36 Williams' platoon (the only platoon in the company which still possessed an effective strength) came under fire from Post 34 and England ordered them to go no farther that night. However, Williams had sent first one of his sections (Corporal Benson's[6]) and then another (Corporal Begent's[7]) towards Post 37, which they took, but when Italian artillery and the garrison of Post 35 concentrated fire on 37 Benson withdrew his men to 36 where the rest of the platoon were attempting to silence Post 34 with the aid of a mortar.

For the battalions that had been ordered to move west to reinforce the 19th and 16th Brigades or to protect the flanks, it was a day of much weary and seemingly profitless marching. After an arduous advance from outside the eastern edge of the perimeter, the 2/5th arrived in the 19th Brigade's area in the middle of the afternoon, whereupon Robertson ordered Lieut-Colonel King to swing northwards and occupy a position along the escarpment with his right on the Wadi Cheteita, and the 2/11th Battalion on his left. King reached this position at dusk and, having arrived there by this roundabout route, was placed under Savige's command again. Thus at the end of the day Savige's battalions were across the heads of the deep wadis from Zeitun to a point four miles to the west, the 2/7th on the right, 2/6th in the centre and 2/5th on the left. Next to the left lay the 19th Brigade on a wide arc from the Wadi es Sciausc through Solaro to Pilastrino, whence the line bent back to Post 39.

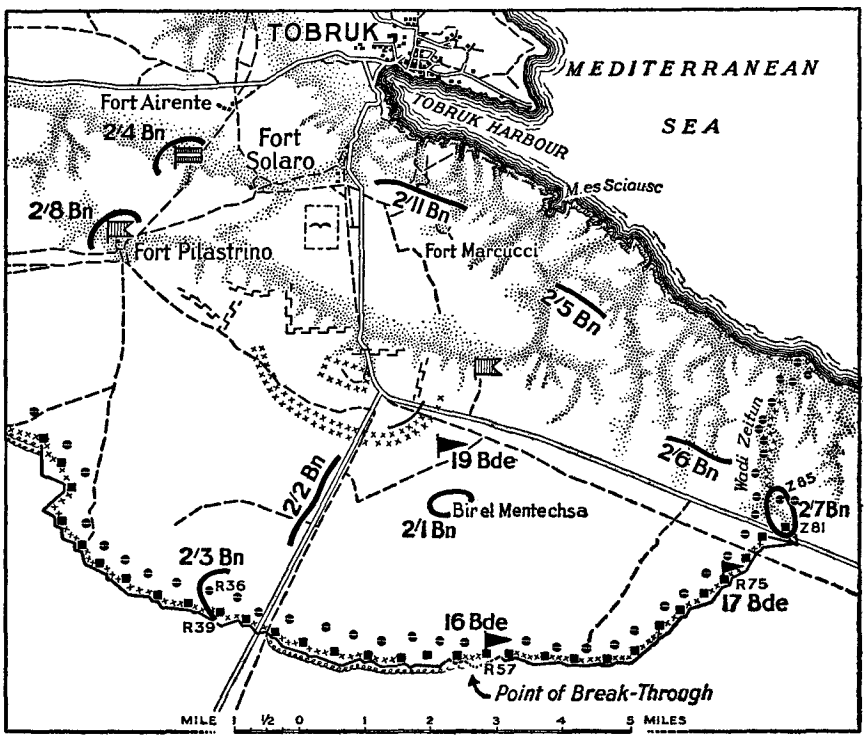
When making his plans before the attack opened Savige had decided that enemy troops and guns in the Cheteita area might prove troublesome and had ordered Godfrey to allot a company to the task of capturing this fortress area after he had rejoined 17th Brigade. Rowan's was selected. At 7.45 p.m. (anticipating that he would again be called upon to reinforce Robertson) Savige gave orders that the 2/7th should relieve the 2/6th which would move into reserve except for Rowan's company; this company would capture the Cheteita fortress area. The 2/7th was to hold the front with only two companies, and keep two available to clear the enemy from the wadis at dawn.

To most of the weary men in the forward companies it seemed that the battle was won. At Bardia the Italian guns were firing vigorously at the end of the first day; at Tobruk they were now almost silent. Over the harbour black plumes of smoke were rising. Ahead of Solaro and Pilastrino there was no sound except of rumbling explosions as the enemy blew up stores of ammunition and fuel. Along the line of Australian outposts the desert was lit up eerily after darkness fell by the fires that blazed in the west and by intermittent flashes from burning dumps, bright enough to make patrolling difficult. Farther south a cluster of fires showed where

[6] Lt J. J. Benson, MM, NX9561; 2/3 Bn. Insurance agent; of Petersham, NSW; b. Marrickville, NSW, 15 Mar 1917.

[7] Cpl J. A. Begent, NX4634; 2/3 Bn. Labourer; of Ainslie, Canberra; b. Hobart, 27 Nov 1913. Killed in action 26 Jun 1941.

some 8,000 Italian prisoners who had been herded along the road to a fenced enclosure three miles north of El Adem were trying to keep themselves warm. Late at night, while the line of battle was still, a squadron of Italian aircraft, in futile response to Tobruk's appeals for help, saw the



Position at dusk, 21st January 1941.

fires, and dropped their bomb loads on them. The number of prisoners killed was reported at various figures between 50 and 300; the Italians were huddled together and the effect of the bombs was appalling.[8]

That night Mackay gave orders for a final blow the following day. On the right one battalion of the 19th Brigade would clear the escarpment on the south side of the harbour, while the other two battalions would advance from Solaro to the coast and enter the town from the west. Again the 17th Brigade would be drawn upon to assist a neighbouring brigade; on this occasion the 2/6th Battalion was ordered at 2.45 a.m. to be at

[8] Medical officers who arrived from 2/1 Fd Amb reported 300 wounded men, apart from the dead. In the afternoon, after 200 of these had been sent to the 2/2 Fd Amb and some Australian regimental medical officers and three Italian medical officers had been at work at the prison cage for hours, eighty-six wounded Italians were still held by the 2/1 Amb. Six of these died during the night. As at Bardia the sky had been kept clear of Italian aircraft by day and the troops saw only their own machines overhead—particularly the Lysanders, scouting low and always trailed by puffs of smoke from bursting anti-aircraft shells.



(Imperial War Museum photo)

Australian infantrymen advancing towards the town of Tobruk.



Units of Australian infantry rest on the heights overlooking Tobruk after having advanced through the outer defences of the area.



(Australian War Memorial photos)

Australian infantrymen on the heights overlooking Tobruk harbour from the south, 22nd January 1941.



(Australian War Memorial photo)

Some of the prisoners captured at Tobruk. Part of the wire surrounding the cage can be seen in the background.



(Australian War Memorial photo)

Australian troops approaching Derna, January 1941.

Sidi Mahmud at 9 a.m. under the command of the 19th Brigade.[9] Allen was instructed to advance westward next morning to Post 19, and also to take over the Pilastrino area. He gave orders to his battalion commanders —the 2/2nd on the right, 2/1st in the centre and 2/3rd on the left—to advance on a wide front.

Certain that his company would lead the advance along the perimeter next morning, Abbot had asked Williams in Post 36 to try to take the two next posts during the night. These were being defended with uncommon stubbornness, and Abbot feared that they might delay the advance next morning. Having anticipated this request, Sergeant Long had placed sticks on the ground pointing from 36 towards 37 and 34, since there were no landmarks and he had no compass, and, with six volunteers, he moved out towards Post 37. Although dumps of stores and ammunition which were burning in the Italian lines ahead lit up the desert, it took two hours of cautious movement to find the post. There was no one in it so the raiders threw away the breech-blocks or bent the barrels of the guns and returned to 36. At dawn next morning Long went out against 34 and 35. The forty men in the first post surrendered without a fight and, as the attackers approached 35, the garrison suddenly raced out and the post blew up behind them.

About the same time two Italian officers approached the 2/8th's lines three miles to the north-west with news that General della Mura of the *61st Division* (whose headquarters were not in Pilastrino but in the wadi just beyond it) wished to surrender. Lieutenant Phelan and two of his men went forward to escort the Italian general in to the Australian lines. The general protested in so surly a fashion at being expected to surrender to a junior officer that Major Key was sent for. Della Mura protested that Key also was too junior to take the surrender of a divisional commander, but his complaints had to be disregarded. Behind their commander followed a procession of several thousand officers and men.

Thus, with its senior commanders captured, and more than half of the fortress in the hands of an attacker who was close enough to fire a rifle shot into the town itself, the Italian garrison was not in the mood to offer even a token resistance to the full-scale attack planned for this second day. From dawn onwards came reports from all along the front that the Italians were intent on surrender. In accordance with his plan outlined the previous evening Savige sent companies of the 2/7th, each reinforced by carriers, a mortar and a machine-gun platoon of the Cheshire, into the

[9] After the battle both Savige and Godfrey wrote reports that adversely criticised the employment of 17 Bde. Even more definitely than at Bardia the brigade had been used as a pool from which reinforcements for the other brigades could be drawn, and both Savige and Godfrey considered that this had led to the battalions being marched and counter-marched in a way which wore out the men without contributing to the victory. The orders (Savige wrote) were "unjustified by events and . . . resulted only in exhausted units and a weakened brigade. This brigade took adequate steps to protect the flank of 19 Bde, and the commander, 19 Bde was informed . . . The transfer of 2/5 Bn . . . obtained nothing beyond an added distance to a long march and the loss of an important reserve to 17 Bde." Godfrey wrote: "The considerable ground we were forced to cover after a strenuous preceding day may have seriously prejudiced less hardy troops. Had we been retained at Sidi Mahmud and used where required the efficiency of the troops would have been greater." Orders for the march of the 2/6 Bn from Sidi Mahmud were given to Godfrey by Robertson's liaison officer at 9.40 a.m., but the march took place from 1 a.m. onwards after the town had been occupied and resistance had collapsed.

wadis to ferret out the Italians there. By 9.30 Captain J. R. Savige who commanded one of these columns had taken the surrender of the local area commander at a post on the western headland of the Wadi ed Delia and, with brusque words, had persuaded him to telephone to the other posts in his area ordering them to surrender, thus saving his own men from having to clamber through steep ravines. Rowan's company of the 2/6th (it will be recalled that it remained forward when the remainder of the battalion was withdrawn) had led a similar column to the fort on the headland at el Cheteita. Rowan arrived to find the white flag flying near a considerable fortress eventually found to be manned by fifty officers and 400 men and armed with ten guns of 3-inch to 6-inch calibre. The Italians, one-third of whom were naval men, declared that they had not fired the guns since the 20th but had spent the previous day destroying their weapons. On the escarpment to the left the 2/5th and 2/11th met no opposition. Dougherty's advance from his positions forward of Solaro was delayed until 11 o'clock while he waited for five infantry tanks, and then his men moved on Fort Airente in clouds of dust whipped up by the wind and the churning tracks of the tanks. On the flank of the 2/4th the leading companies of the 2/8th advanced north towards the coast, while the 2/2nd took over Pilastrino. Next to the left the 2/1st which had moved up from its position in reserve had begun its advance at 8 a.m. deployed over a wide front, as though exercising on an open training ground. A gazelle ran across the front and some men fired at it. Promptly some hundreds of Italians showed themselves 500 yards ahead waving white flags. Some distance past the El Adem road the line reached the edge of a two-miles wide saucer-like depression on the far rim of which could be seen a line of white flags. Eather and his adjutant, Captain Jackson,[1] who were riding in a carrier with the front line of the battalion, drove forward and found some 3,000 Italians drawn up as if on parade with the officers in front holding their portmanteaus in their hands. The officers were shaven and wore well-tended uniforms and polished boots. The senior Italian officer looked with disdain at the dusty Eather in a drab greatcoat and over it, concealing the badges, a leather jerkin and scarf. After the Australians had taken the officers' pistols (the men carried no weapons) Eather sent the prisoners towards Pilastrino with no guards to escort them. On the perimeter one post fired for a while in the early morning and then surrendered, after which the 2/3rd led by two tanks began to march along the perimeter occupying post after post, most of which had evidently been abandoned the previous night.

On the road leading down the last escarpment and into the town overlooking the 19th Brigade advance were two carriers of the divisional cavalry under Lieutenant Hennessy[2] who was protecting the right flank of the 2/4th Battalion. Robertson and Onslow were near by. Observing no signs of life in the town Robertson told Onslow to send carriers

[1] Brig D. R. Jackson, DSO, NX207. 2/1 Bn 1939-41, BM 24 Bde 1941-43; CO 2/28 Bn 1945. Regular soldier; of Sydney; b. Sunningdale, Berks, Eng, 12 Oct 1915.

[2] Lt-Col E. C. Hennessy, DSO, MC, NX8676. 6 Cav Regt and CO 2/6 Cav (Cdo) Regt 1944-45. Of Pine Rocks, via Orange, NSW; b. Lithgow, NSW, 8 Sep 1910.

forward to investigate, and dispatched an order to Dougherty to send a company to enter Tobruk with him along the harbour road. Hennessy's carriers ran down the road until they were stopped by a barrier consisting of an iron girder supported by sandbags. Sergeant Mills[3] and his crew pulled down this obstacle with the aid of two Italians who ran forward to help. A burst from a Bren gun was fired at an Italian who appeared to be about to shoot at Mills. Then Hennessy led the way into the town. He fired a burst from his Vickers gun at a truck-load of Italians moving back into Tobruk and caused them to stop. As he was driving along the street a neat Italian officer came forward and explained that he had been sent to lead him to the naval headquarters where the commander was waiting to surrender. Hennessy sat him on the front of his carrier "as a guarantee of good faith" and continued to a large building facing a wide courtyard, where he was led to an Italian admiral surrounded by his staff. The admiral offered his sword, but Hennessy declined it and sent one of his carriers back to inform Robertson, with whom was Brigadier Morshead, commander of the 18th Australian Brigade, who had come to Tobruk as an observer.

At the door of the naval headquarters a nervous Italian officer met Robertson and conducted him to a room where Admiral Massimiliano Vietina was standing with his staff. An Italian officer who acted as interpreter told Robertson that Vietina and 1,500 officers and men wished to surrender. Robertson brusquely enquired whether there were any booby traps or mines in the town and added that if one Australian was killed Italians would pay for it. The Admiral's interpreter replied that all mines and traps had been "sprung" and, in explanation of loud explosions outside, that the men were "springing" the ammunition dumps. In the rooms near by piles of documents were smouldering. Thus the town and naval station was surrendered to two brigadiers (Morshead had been a spectator of the scene), fewer than a dozen cavalrymen and a group of newspaper correspondents who had followed Robertson's car into the town. The interview over, Onslow went into the courtyard and fired Very lights into the sky as a signal that the town had fallen. In a few minutes hundreds of Italians began to stream upstairs from sleeping quarters below naval headquarters and assemble in the courtyard. The remainder of Hennessy's squadron soon entered the town and a carrier was posted at every street junction. An exuberant Australian ran up a Digger's hat on the flagpole outside the Admiral's headquarters. Although the town had been occupied, the line of five battalions continued sweeping the remainder of the fortress area, moving in the shape of a bent arm whose shoulder rested on Tobruk harbour. In the afternoon the 16th Brigade battalions, then on the Derna road, met units of the 7th Armoured Division which had crossed the perimeter from the west that morning. The Support Group, which had demonstrated on the western face of the perimeter on the 21st, had found the Italians still resisting strongly there on the morning of the 22nd.

[3] Sgt G. M. Mills, NX565; 6 Cav Regt. Pastoralist; of Mosman, NSW; b. Katoomba, NSW, 31 Dec 1913. Killed in action 27 Jan 1941. (Son of Brig A. J. Mills.)

The 2/Rifle Brigade attacked the post from R1 to S11 while the 1/King's Royal Rifle Corps probed the Wadi es Sehel sector. Both met strong fire. Pressure was maintained, but it was not until early in the afternoon that resistance collapsed in the western sector.

By the end of the day the number of prisoners was estimated at 25,000 (later 27,000 were counted in the prisoner cage but an accurate count is difficult in such circumstances), the captured field and medium guns at 208; twenty-three medium tanks were captured and 200 vehicles.[4] The water distilleries and the wells which together were able to provide 40,000 gallons of water a day were intact and there was enough tinned food—vegetables, fruit and veal—to last the Italian garrison for two months. There were thousands of cases of mineral water branded "Recoaro" which had been stored at Tobruk so that the garrison could avoid drinking the unpleasantly brackish water from the wells.

The town itself had evidently been a pleasant place of white brick and plaster buildings, including a hotel, a restaurant, some well-designed offices and enough shops to serve a garrison of 10,000 or so. The buildings had not been greatly damaged by air bombardment, but shops and houses had been ransacked by the Italians. Here (as later at Derna) the Australian soldier received blame for the evident looting of the town; in fact he entered towns which had already been scenes of earlier disorder. The Italians had done some damage to the harbour, and it was encumbered by the wrecks of three large ships—the old cruiser *San Giorgio,* and the merchantmen *Marco Polo* and *Liguria.* However, under the clouds of smoke rising from the burning cruiser and the ammunition dumps, suggesting to a distant observer that only smouldering ruins lay below, was a port that, within three days, was in fair working order. An effective fire that had been lit in the main power station was put out by Lieut-Commander Green,[5] naval liaison officer with XIII Corps. One main jetty was practically undamaged and there was a flotilla of undamaged schooners, pontoons and launches.

One of the incoming force's greatest embarrassments was the number of prisoners. More than 20,000 of them were soon herded into a fenced enclosure measuring about 800 yards by 400 yards which the Italians had erected near the junction of the El Adem and Bardia roads to house their own prisoners. Here during more than six weeks never fewer than 7,000 and sometimes over 20,000 prisoners were crowded like sheep in a dusty pen. Many of the men lacked blankets, and the nights were bitterly cold. To give them adequate medical care was far beyond the resources of their captors. There was no sanitation; and, at first, it took one of the two

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[4] The casualties in the Australian battalions were:

16 Bde	Offrs	ORs	*17 Bde*	Offrs	ORs	*19 Bde*	Offrs	ORs
2/1 Bn . .	—	32	2/5 Bn . .	—	4	2/4 Bn . .	3	8 to 15
2/2 Bn . .	—	16	2/6 Bn . .	—	10	2/8 Bn . .	9	95
2/3 Bn . .	7	50	2/7 Bn . .	1	8	2/11 Bn . .	—	7

The total casualties in 6 Div were 49 killed and died of wounds and 306 wounded.

[5] Cdr Arnold H. Green, DSC, RAN. Comd HMAS *Warrego* 1942, *Napier* 1942-44. Of Surrey Hills, Vic; b. 23 Mar 1906.

infantry companies posted at the cage seven hours to distribute the day's rations—one tin of veal, two biscuits and a bottle of water to each man, though few prisoners had even a bottle to receive their water in. From the 23rd to the 26th the 2/7th Battalion was on guard and strove unceasingly to feed and water the prisoners. The 2/2nd Battalion which relieved the 2/7th reduced the time spent feeding the prisoners to five hours by installing water tubs and employing Italian N.C.O's to organise the lines. Eventually the guards from this battalion made sure that every prisoner had at least a greatcoat or blanket and his own water bottle.[6] To keep the prisoners' spirits up the Australians kept them singing for hours on end and sometimes would sing back to them. There usually was a thick dust cloud over the cage. That so few of the Italians died does credit to the hard work and the genuine sympathy of the infantrymen of the 16th Brigade who controlled and fed them. Gradually the numbers were reduced by sending them eastwards to Egypt in empty trucks that had come forward carrying supplies, and after the harbour was opened 1,500 to 2,000 were shipped away every second or third day. By the middle of February the number of prisoners had been reduced to about 10,000 and by the end of the month to 7,000, but on 28th February convoys, each containing 800 to 1,000 prisoners, began to arrive from Benghazi and, in a few days, the cage contained 11,000. The Tobruk cage was finally emptied in March.[7]

Important changes were made in General Mackay's staff after Tobruk. Colonel Berryman, who had been appointed to command the artillery of 7th Division with effect from 14th December 1940, but who had been retained by Mackay who wished to avoid a change at the outset of a campaign, left the 6th Division to take up his new post. He was succeeded by Colonel Vasey, who, in his turn, was succeeded as senior administrative officer by Lieut-Colonel Prior[8] who had been understudying Vasey for some weeks.

The garrison at Tobruk had comprised some 27,000 men, including the *61st Division*; thus the British Intelligence estimates were fairly accurate. The Italian leaders do not seem to have contemplated any effort to relieve the besieged force. On 9th January Graziani had issued orders that

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[6] Col Chilton later wrote an account of what he saw there. "There was a terrific dust storm blowing, and the limited area of the enclosure was so full of men that there was hardly room to move. All officers had been removed and 20,000 or more men were a completely unorganised and panic-stricken rabble. Many had not had anything to drink, let alone a meal, for many hours. I found 200 to 300 lying on the ground outside a small building in which an Italian doctor was working. They appeared to be dead but apparently they were acute cases of exhaustion and thirst, and I think nearly all recovered. The first attempt to get water into the cage ended in a wild stampede; I had not thought that a crowd of men could so resemble a stampeding herd of cattle. Capt Caldwell (whose company was on duty) managed to obtain concrete tubs filled with water and, to some extent, to regulate the rush . . . . The sanitary conditions were indescribable. After we had fed and watered the prisoners the greatest possible efforts were made to provide trenches and insist on their use. Drastic punishment was meted out to offenders . . . I don't know how we managed to avoid a major epidemic. Gradually conditions improved. Caldwell did a magnificent job under the most difficult conditions."

[7] One of a number of officers who did duty at the cage and later became prisoner of the Germans said afterwards: "I've been a prisoner and I've never seen such appalling conditions as at Tobruk."

[8] Brig C. E. Prior, CBE, SX1470. (1st AIF: 33 Bn and 3 MG Bn.) CO 2/1 MG Bn 1939-40; AA & QMG 6 Div 1941; DAG HQ AIF (ME) 1941-42; HQ NG Force 1943-44. Regular soldier; of Manly, NSW; b. Boorowa, NSW, 19 Aug 1895.

resistance was to be offered on the line through Derna, Giovanni Berta, Mechili. Resistance at Tobruk would give time to improve the defences on this line. The Italians still vastly over-estimated the strength of the British force. On 9th January they believed that there were two armoured and three infantry divisions in Cyrenaica, two more divisions at Buq Buq and two at Mersa Matruh.

There now remained in North Africa only five Italian metropolitan divisions of the twelve which had originally formed its garrison, and nearly half of the 250,000 Italian troops in the *Tenth* and *Fifth Armies* had been killed or captured.

CHAPTER 10

THE ENGAGEMENT AT DERNA

FROM Tobruk the bitumen road ran along the coastal shelf through Gazala and Tmimi, skirted the Gulf of Bomba (where a side road led to a small Italian seaplane base) and, leaving the coast, travelled across an open plateau to Derna. West of the road as it nears that town the country is cut by the Wadi Derna, which reproduces on a vastly larger scale the wadis which had protected each extremity of the semi-circle of posts at Bardia and Tobruk; this ravine travels about twelve miles south and south-west from Derna before it turns west and loses itself in the uplands. Near its mouth it is, in some places, a mile wide from lip to lip, and the banks so steep that they descend 700 feet in a horizontal distance of 400 yards. On the coast, for some thirty miles to the east of the wadi's mouth, the plateau ends in an escarpment from 400 to 700 feet in height. The road zigzagged down this escarpment to Derna, which was built on a mile-wide ledge at the mouth of the wadi; then it travelled along the narrow shore for five miles before winding up the escarpment again into the Jebel Achdar.

There were two other principal routes to the tablelands beyond Derna: one was a track from Martuba, which skirted the southern end of the Wadi Derna and then turned north to Giovanni Berta; the other route was along desert tracks to Mechili, forty miles south of Giovanni Berta, the meeting place of a web of tracks leading north, west and south. On this southern track, by-passing Derna and the tableland, it was possible to cross the desert to the Tripoli road south of Benghazi.

What lay ahead? When Tobruk fell the headquarters of the Italian *Tenth Army* were believed to be at Cyrene, of its *XX Corps* at Giovanni Berta, but of this army and this corps there probably remained only the *60th (Sabratha) Division,* believed to be in position east of Derna, with a regiment at Mechili, where there was also an armoured brigade possessing sixty or seventy tanks commanded by General Babini. It was considered possible, on the 23rd, that two additional Italian divisions were farther west in Cyrenaica, namely the *17th* (*Pavia*) and the *27th* (*Brescia*), recently arrived from Tripolitania.

At a conference with General Wavell in Cairo soon after Bardia had been taken General O'Connor had proposed that, after the fall of Tobruk, he should continue the advance to Mechili, whence he could threaten the flank of the Italian force on the coast. Wavell showed him an appreciation of a proposed raid as far as Benghazi, but O'Connor wished, after Mechili, to undertake "a more permanent operation on Benghazi." Soon after his return to the desert O'Connor was instructed by the staff of General Wilson that the proposal to advance on Benghazi was not to be proceeded with (probably an outcome of the instruction received from the Chiefs of Staff in London on 8th January). Promptly O'Connor, who had been

chafing under what he considered a complicated system of command, protested that he had received conflicting instructions. Soon afterwards XIII Corps had been placed directly under Wavell's command; Wilson was informed by Wavell that he was to become Military Governor of Cyrenaica; and O'Connor instructed to prepare plans for an advance to Benghazi. By the 22nd, in consequence of the negotiations recorded in the previous chapter, O'Connor learnt that the capture of Benghazi was now considered of the greatest importance. The proposal of the Chiefs of Staff was that it be converted into a strong air and naval base, receiving its supplies by sea instead of over the uneconomical land route through the desert.

On the same day, in obedience to O'Connor's orders, and while the Australians were entering the town of Tobruk, the armoured division began to move west;[1] an advance-guard of the 6th Division was ordered to move towards Derna on the 23rd. That advance-guard was to comprise Onslow's squadron of the 6th Cavalry with some artillery, machine-gunners, engineers and detachments of other troops.[2] As soon as this force reached Martuba, eighteen miles from Derna, it was to relieve a detachment which the armoured division would place across the road there. Mackay considered that this little force might be able to take Derna "as a gift for Australia on Anniversary day (26th January)"—as he told Onslow, encouraging this ardent young leader. But in case resistance was too strong for so small a force he ordered that the 19th Brigade, strengthened with artillery, engineers and machine-gunners, was to advance towards Derna, absorb Onslow's force and (so ran the orders) "facilitate attack by 6th Division, or attack and occupy the town."[3]

Meanwhile, on the morning of the 22nd, the 7th Armoured Brigade had advanced along the main road, and found it blocked in the neighbourhood of Martuba. The 11th Hussars sent patrols from Bir el Aleima both north and south of Mechili. By nightfall the 4th Armoured Brigade was advancing towards Mechili. On the 23rd patrols of the 7th Armoured Brigade had established touch with the enemy astride the road at Siret el Chreiba, ten miles from Derna, and the 4th Brigade was twenty-five miles east of Mechili, with patrols west of it, and had blocked the tracks leading into Mechili from west, south and south-east. On the 24th the 4th Armoured Brigade encountered a force including fifty medium tanks on the Derna-Mechili track and, in an ensuing engagement, destroyed nine Italian tanks, losing one cruiser and six light tanks of its own. Artillery of the armoured

[1] In its enthusiasm it withdrew from its positions opposite the northern end of the perimeter before 16 Bde had occupied all of it, to the annoyance of Allen who declared that this had led to the escape of several thousand Italians. Some of these Italians were rounded up by motor patrols of 16 Bde which ranged over the desert for fifteen miles to the west during the following three days.

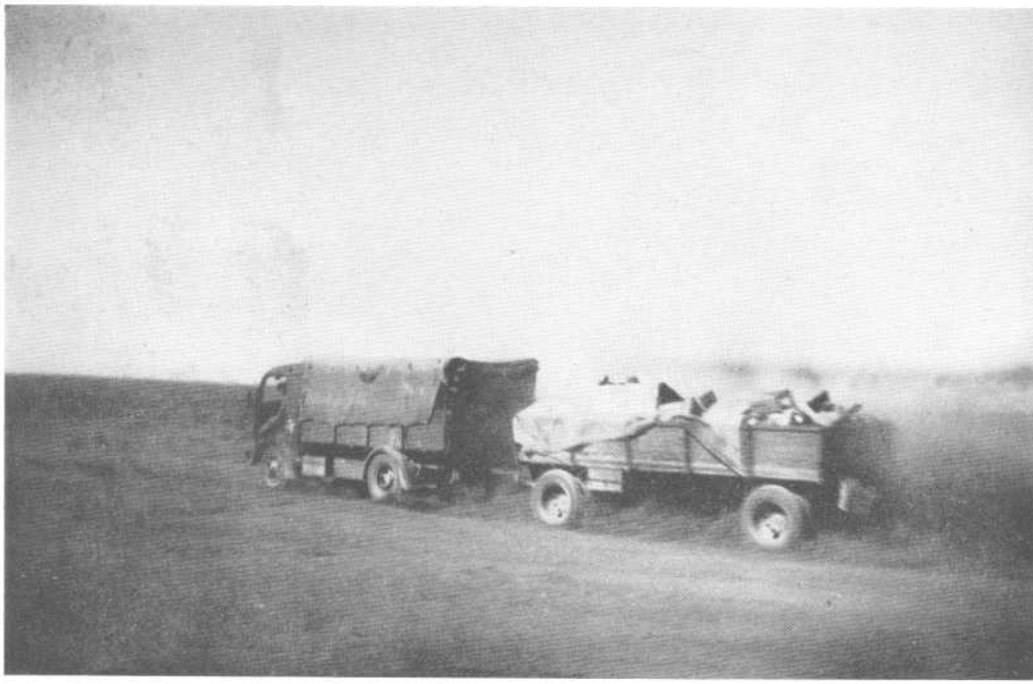
[2] These were "A" Sqn 6 Div Cav, one bty 2/1 Fd Regt, one tp of "J" Bty of the RHA, one tp 37 LAA Regt, one coy of the 1/RNF, a detachment of the 6 Svy Regt and a section of the 2/2 Fd Amb.

[3] The 17th Brigade was disappointed not to be chosen for this role. Savige wrote in his war diary: "Prior to Tobruk Brigadier Commanding was ordered to study the map representation of the terrain about Derna with the view of 17 Bde operating there. Orders were also given to D.A.D.O.S. to provide 17 Bde with necessary equipment to make up shortages. However, on the afternoon of 21 Jan, Brig was informed that 19 Inf Bde would be given the job . . . ."



(Imperial War Museum photo)

The road winding up the escarpment from Derna into the Jebel Achdar, 5th February 1941.



(Taken by Author)

Desert near Wadi Derna (17th Brigade): Captured Italian trucks and trailers were used on the desert supply lines.



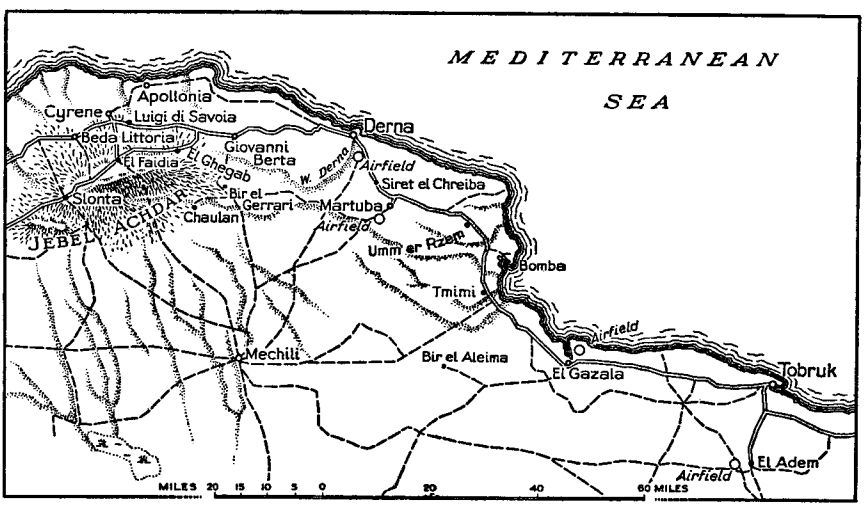
(Taken by Author)

Beyond Derna (19th Brigade): An engineer probing for anti-tank mines before the vehicles move through.

division engaged an enemy force estimated at two-thirds of a division with fifty tanks and six batteries on a knoll north-west of Mechili fort.

By 4 p.m. on the 24th Onslow's advance-guard of the 6th Division had reached the Martuba area. Here, just as the cavalrymen arrived, an Italian landed in a CR-42 and, when he was bailed up by an Australian, explained that he did not know that the aerodrome was occupied by the enemy. (His machine was captured intact and afterwards flown by No. 3 Squadron, R.A.A.F.) Onslow moved forward during the afternoon and found that a squadron of the 1st Royal Tanks was forward of him and, with the support of a troop of field guns, was shelling Siret el Chreiba, a square white blockhouse near the southern edge of an Italian aerodrome which lay on the right of the road where it crosses the flat bare plain before descending to Derna.

At daybreak on 25th January Onslow took over from the British force, which had then occupied the blockhouse. He gave one small group of his carriers the task of protecting the blockhouse, where an artillery observa-



tion post was established, while a second group moved round the right flank and reached a point at the top of the escarpment whence the town itself could be seen. During the morning the carriers probed forward round the aerodrome, finding in the gently rolling ground little cover against the intermittent fire of some Italian anti-tank and machine-guns. Occasionally Italian guns would fire along the road and on the British artillery positions each side of it. It was soon apparent that they would not be able to rush Derna without the help of infantry; the fire was not heavy, however, and the cavalrymen decided that the aerodrome was held only by some artillery, including anti-tank guns, and a few machine-gunners, and passed on this opinion to the infantry of the 19th Brigade, now beginning to arrive.

The 2/11th, the leading battalion of Robertson's brigade, dismounted from its trucks a mile south of Siret el Chreiba at 12.30 p.m. and advanced astride the road with two companies forward. Lieut-Colonel Louch[4] ordered Captain Egan's[5] company, on the right, to occupy the edge of the escarpment, while Captain Honner's advanced across the aerodrome itself. Captain Horley's[6] company was to protect the left flank. Thus the West Australians who, alone among the infantry battalions, had had little fighting at Bardia or Tobruk, went into their first real action.

Honner's company marched three miles astride the road before it came to the forward outpost of the cavalry on the southern edge of the aerodrome, where he was assured by the cavalrymen that all was quiet ahead except for spasmodic artillery fire and perhaps two machine-guns mounted on motor-cycles some 500 yards forward. In the morning, he was told, carriers of the cavalry squadron, and Colonel Barker of the artillery, had been forward as far as the hangar. This was comforting news because the ground ahead was as flat as a table and devoid of cover. Honner, an exceptionally cool and resolute leader, deployed his company with two platoons forward and one in reserve, and advanced at 1.30 p.m. The Italian motor-cyclists opened fire but were quickly overrun and captured. Heavier fire from artillery and machine-guns now began to sweep the aerodrome but, "remembering the victory of speed over fire at Bardia", the men kept moving steadily across the open plain until the fire, from ridges two miles away, became so heavy that they went to ground. Honner sent back a signal asking for support and, at the same time, ordered his reserve platoon forward on the right of the road to give covering fire for a final dash. This platoon was pinned down under the Italian fire while it was yet 3,000 yards from the objective. An attached company of the Northumberland Fusiliers tried to bring their machine-guns forward but neither they nor the anti-tank gunners could advance far enough to gain effective range.

Determined to obtain supporting fire, Honner ran back to a truck carrying one of the battalion's mortars and, himself carrying a load of bombs, led the team forward to the infantry who were steadily crawling forward in the open. As they advanced the fire became heavier and casualties mounted until seven men of the two platoons had been killed or wounded. Lieutenant McRobbie,[7] on the right, kept moving coolly from one of his sections to the other controlling their snakelike movement, while, on the left, Lieutenant Johnson[8] and four men, later joined by Honner himself, went well forward until they reached a ditch beside the

[4] Brig T. S. Louch, MC, WX2. (1st AIF: Cpl to Capt 11 Bn; Capt 51 Bn.) CO 2/11 Bn 1939-41; Comd 29 Bde 1941-42. Solicitor; of Perth, WA; b. Geraldton, WA, 30 Mar 1894.

[5] Lt-Col E. W. Egan, WX19. 2/11 Bn; CO 6 Bn 1942-44, 35 Bn 1944-45. Telephone traffic officer; of Perth, WA; b. Kanowna, WA, 1 Dec 1910.

[6] Lt-Col R. J. Horley, WX11. 2/11 Bn and CO 16 Bn 1942-45. Farmer and Grazier; of Northam, WA; b. Coalville, Vic, 8 Jun, 1909.

[7] Lt A. F. McRobbie, WX242; 2/11 Bn. Storeman; of East Perth, WA; b. Bayswater, WA, 6 Oct 1914.

[8] Lt K. T. Johnson, WX259; 2/11 Bn. Life assurance clerk; of Perth, WA; b. West Leederville, WA, 29 Mar 1920.

road a few hundred yards south of the hangar. From this point Honner was able to see beyond the hangar some of the Italian gun positions, and Corporal Bremner[1] and Private Graffin,[2] who joined Honner and Johnson, fired on them with Bren and rifle. This brought a concentration of fire on the little party, the tracer bullets clearly revealing its origin: there were machine-guns firing from buildings some thirty yards beyond the hangar, and behind the low ridges 300 to 400 yards farther on were four tanks with eight trucks on which machine-guns were mounted. These vehicles were in hull-down positions along a front of 1,000 yards firing tracer and explosive bullets. More fire was coming from guns in buildings and on trucks on the left of the road, and from a slight ridge behind these buildings. At this stage some Italian aircraft dropped a string of bombs on an east-west line between the Australian and Italian positions. As the bombs hit the ground the Australians spontaneously leaped to their feet and raced forward into the dust until it subsided and the Italian fire again became heavy. Thus they gained perhaps 100 yards.

It was now late in the afternoon and Honner decided to hold on until dusk and then capture the group of buildings, and establish his company there as a base for further operations. As Graffin lay out in the open firing burst after burst at the Italian gun positions, Private Rogers[3] went back to summon the remainder of the two platoons forward. Honner's third platoon was still pinned down by galling fire on the flat ground left of the road and well to the rear.

At dusk, a 3-inch mortar arrived, though without a range-finder (its bearer had been killed) and with only six bombs. Although the Italian fire had not diminished it was now too dark for the Australians to be seen by the Italians on the ridges yet light enough for the attackers to move in on the hangars. Honner ordered McRobbie's platoon to cross the road, advance along the left of it till the men were level with the hangar, and then charge. McRobbie set off, but soon word came back to Honner that McRobbie had been hit and the platoon was not moving. Immediately he led the remaining platoon forward with the three Bren gunners in front ready to give fire from the hip. As he drew level with McRobbie his platoon too moved forward. Farther on the men lay flat while the company's mortar fired with good effect along both sides of the hangar in preparation for a final advance. Bursts of fire suddenly came from new Italian positions only a few yards ahead in the semi-darkness, causing more casualties,[4] but not so many as would have been suffered if Honner had not, fortunately, chosen that moment to keep his men's heads down for the mortar bombardment. After a few mortar bombs had been sent over the Italian fire died down and the Australians advanced to the

[1] Cpl A. K. Bremner, WX264; 2/11 Bn. Carriage and waggon builder; of Cottesloe, WA; b. Mt Lawley, WA, 23 Nov 1918. Accidentally killed 18 Feb 1941.

[2] Pte F. Graffin, WX2304; 2/11 Bn. Truck driver; of Kalgoorlie, WA; b. Kalgoorlie, 4 Jul 1919. Killed in action 20 May 1941.

[3] Cpl D. R. Rogers, WX820; 2/11 Bn. Gold miner; of Kalgoorlie, WA; b. York, WA, 11 Nov 1908.

[4] Pte Rogers was wounded here when he crawled forward to help a comrade, Pte S. B. Horner (of Gnowangerup, WA) who had been mortally hit.

hangars. A few moments later an Italian motor-cyclist rode into the Australian positions, was brought down with a pick handle hurled by McRobbie, and captured. He informed Honner that he was carrying a message from an Italian company on the left of the road to another that had been occupying the hangars. The motor-cycle was used to send a report back to Louch.[5]

While Honner's company was attracting most of the enemy's fire, Egan's on the right had advanced across the north-east corner of the airfield and, without loss, reached its objective—the edge of the escarpment overlooking Derna and the coast. During the night Honner established his whole company in the hangar area. A party of the Northumberland Fusiliers arrived with two machine-guns, and an artillery observer joined the infantry. At dawn on the 26th one or two tanks were seen in the gloom forward of Honner's men, but their crews were shot down as they moved towards them. There followed a prolonged exchange of fire between the Australians on the aerodrome, now supported by well-directed artillery fire, and the Italians along the ridges. By 8 a.m. the Italian fire had slackened and an hour later the West Australians and the machine-gunners of the Northumberland Fusiliers had taken the ridges and were on the edge of the escarpment above the town of Derna. In the fight two men in Honner's company had been killed and twenty-one wounded severely enough to be sent back to the field ambulance and beyond, a low cost for an advance across a featureless plain in the face of an uncommonly determined Italian rearguard which greatly outnumbered the attackers and had the support of tanks as well as artillery.

Meanwhile, when Brigadier Robertson's second battalion, the 2/4th, arrived at Martuba on the 25th, he ordered it to get a grip on the Wadi Derna (not necessarily to cross it), and block the two roads leading south to Mechili. That afternoon Lieut-Colonel Dougherty moved his battalion, still in its trucks, along the road leading west from Martuba, dismounted them near Gabr el Carmusa and, having detached two platoons to guard the roads, sent two companies to the Wadi Derna north-west of Gabr es Saeti. Steering with the aid of compasses the leading company (Captain Rolfe's) reached the southern edge of the wadi—at this point a ravine about 500 yards wide—late in the evening. Dougherty ordered it to cross. By daybreak some fourteen men of Lieutenant Lindsay's[6] platoon had crossed the wadi and established themselves on the far side after a fight in which one Australian was killed and one wounded and nine Italians were taken prisoner.

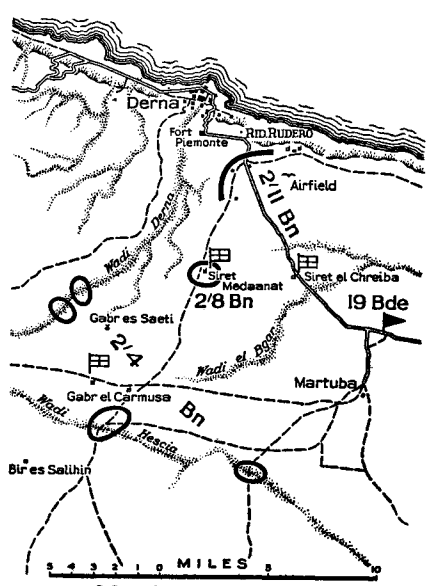
At O'Connor's headquarters it appeared that the enemy's main strength was at Mechili, where evidently some 9,000 men with about sixty tanks occupied a position from the fort to a point about ten miles to the north-

[5] Louch discovered that the Italian had previously grown vegetables in Western Australia, but had been in Italy when war began, and was conscripted. Louch had him hospitably received at his headquarters, hoping to obtain information from him, but he had only recently arrived and knew little.

[6] Maj J. G. Lindsay, MC, NX182; 2/4 Bn. Bank officer; of Sydney; b. Wollongong, NSW, 14 Jan 1908.

west covering the tracks at El Faidia and Slonta. It now seemed certain that the bulk of the *17th* and *27th Divisions* were still in Tripolitania, but that both regiments of the *60th* were in the Derna area. On the northern flank the enemy was in a position of great natural strength; the West Australians had taken the airfield but were under hot artillery fire; although part of the 2/4th Battalion had crossed the immense Wadi Derna it would be difficult to carry supplies to troops there. O'Connor decided, however, that he could isolate the main enemy force at Mechili and, on the evening of the 25th, sent a message to General Creagh of the armoured division stressing the necessity of preventing the Italians from escaping north-westward along the road to Slonta. The chances of cutting off the main enemy force seemed bright. The Support Group was deployed to prevent the enemy force at Mechili from moving east or north; the 4th Armoured Brigade on its left had the task of investing the enemy force to the south, west and north-west; on the 26th the 7th Armoured Brigade, which had hitherto been held in reserve for lack of petrol, was ordered to cut the Mechili-Slonta track; the 11th Hussars were patrolling on the southern flank for thirty miles south of Mechili. O'Connor urged Creagh to use his Support Group to cut the track to Slonta if the going was too hard for tanks, and he instructed Mackay to bring the 17th Brigade forward to attack the enemy force at Mechili while the armoured division contained him. The trap seemed to have been set.

Brigadier Robertson's orders for the 26th were that Louch should patrol strongly and clear the enemy from the scarp east of the wadi, the 2/4th should maintain its bridgehead across the wadi and cut the road which travelled along the ridge parallel to the wadi on the western side, while the 2/8th Battalion marched in between the 2/11th and the 2/4th, ready to cross the wadi west of Siret Medaanat and advance on Derna along the above-mentioned road. He placed Onslow's cavalry squadron on the left to guard against Italian attack along the two roads leading into his left rear from the west and the south. He believed that the force opposed to him consisted of about 400 infantry with some artillery and medium tanks.



Morning 26th January.

In the morning of the 26th Robertson sent a liaison officer to Louch to tell him that there was information that the enemy had

withdrawn from his forward posts and to instruct him to advance on Derna. Louch summoned his company commanders and gave orders that Egan on the right should climb down the escarpment and move along the beach towards the town, Captain Shanahan[7] in the centre should move through Honner's weary men and along the main road, while Horley's company advanced to the edge of the high ground overlooking the wadi. Then about 2.30 p.m., he himself went forward with Barker of the 2/1st Field Regiment to the road junction 500 yards beyond the northern edge of the aerodrome to control the attack. There they found that the enemy was still resisting strongly, particularly with guns that were firing point-blank from one of the old stone forts that lay ahead. Shanahan's company were shelled as they moved across the aerodrome to take over from Honner, who had now advanced to the road elbow beyond the airfield. With a platoon of machine-gunners of the Northumberland Fusiliers, the fresh company advanced astride the road until it came to a belt of mines and a rough stone wall across the road. Here they met machine-gun fire and two men were killed and four wounded, including Lieutenant Chapman,[8] one of the platoon commanders. Shanahan withdrew his men to the shelter of a steep-sided wadi on the south side of the road.

Egan's men clambered down the almost precipitous escarpment to the narrow shore and advanced west. The leading platoons (Lieutenants Webster[9] and Daws[1]) came under point-blank artillery and machine-gun fire. Daws lost four men, Webster three. At dusk Webster had reached a point close to an Italian fort armed with one gun, and, although he himself was wounded, he decided to remain where he was and attack the fort at nightfall. However, it was impossible to have food and water carried down the cliffs to the hundred or more men below, and they were ordered to return. All night they clambered up the Wadi Haseien, a narrow cleft in the escarpment. So rough was the country that nine men were missing the following morning.[2] Farther left the 2/8th advanced into the wadi in obedience to Robertson's order. The leading companies came under fire and an officer and two men were wounded.

Early on the 26th the enemy attacked the little group which the 2/4th had put across the wadi during the night. At first the Italians advanced boldly, but the Australians held their ground and the attack faded out. Later that morning the remainder of Rolfe's company and McCarty's company reached the far side of the wadi. Next morning a large group of Italians blundered on to the Australian posts and about 40 were killed and 56 surrendered.

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[7] Lt-Col P. M. Shanahan, WX17; 2/11 and 14/32 Bns. Clerk; of Bunbury, WA; b. Bunbury, 7 May 1918.

[8] Maj V. P. Chapman, WX12; 2/11 Bn. Shipping clerk; of Perth, WA; b. Geraldton, WA, 3 Jun 1913.

[9] Lt-Col P. G. C. Webster, WX266. 2/11 Bn, and 2/48 Bn 1943-45; CO 57/60 Bn 1945. Salesman and agent; of Claremont, WA; b. Bunbury, WA, 6 Mar 1915.

[1] Lt V. Daws, WX711; 2/11 Bn. Live stock salesman; of Katanning, WA; b. Carnarvon, WA, 29 Oct 1907.

[2] Six rejoined the company later in the day. Sgt P. W. Curtis (of North Cottesloe, WA) and two others, who by some mishap were not informed that the company had withdrawn, made a useful reconnaissance and, after making a wide detour, arrived back on 29 Jan, having had little food or water for 3 days.

Robertson's plan for an advance on Derna along the western side of the wadi was cancelled because of news from the Australians' southern flank that throughout the day Italians on motor-cycles and in tanks had exchanged fire with Onslow's cavalrymen and platoons of the 2/4th astride the tracks leading south to Mechili. From No. 3 Squadron R.A.A.F., now based on Martuba airfield, came news that 200 Italian trucks had been seen a few miles south-west of the 2/4th's position. The question that exercised Robertson was: were these Italians the advance-guard of a force moving out from Mechili to strike his lightly-protected flank? His three battalions, except for two companies, were now pressed against the wadi, leaving only the cavalry and two companies of infantry to guard the tracks leading to the main road behind him and to Martuba. In addition, also on the 26th, he was instructed by Mackay that his role was now to contain the enemy in the Derna-Giovanni Berta area, while the attack at Mechili proceeded.

On the morning of the 27th, however, the disappointing news arrived at O'Connor's headquarters that at daybreak patrols of the 7th Armoured Division had found that the Italian force at Mechili had vanished in the night. O'Connor was incensed by the failure of the armoured division to hold and destroy this Italian force, the main body of which was discovered from the air to be moving north-west towards El Faidia. However, the departure of the Italians left the desert route open and, after discussion with Wavell, O'Connor made a plan for a decisive blow. Wear and tear had reduced the armoured division to 50 cruiser and 95 light tanks, but on the 7th and 9th of February two regiments from the newly-arrived 2nd Armoured Division were due to arrive in the forward area. Insufficient fuel and ammunition was forward to enable the armoured regiments to undertake a long advance, but supplies were gradually being increased. O'Connor decided that, while these reinforcements and supplies were brought forward, the 6th Division, with the 17th Brigade now coming in on the left of the 19th, should press on towards Derna and Giovanni Berta where there were still, apparently, some 6,500 troops of the *60th Division,* in an effort to persuade the enemy that the main thrust was west and north-west. As soon as both petrol and the new regiments were available (which would probably not be before 12th February) Creagh's division would make a swift advance across the desert south of the Jebel Achdar and cut the road south of Benghazi, thus bottling up what remained of the Italian army. The 16th Brigade would occupy Mechili.

Here was a situation which brought out in strong relief the dependence of a motorised army upon its supply services. Ahead of the British commander was the stubborn rearguard of a beaten army. The obvious manoeuvre was to send off the armoured force to pursue and finally encircle the enemy. But wear and tear of tanks and lack of enough vehicles to bring petrol, ammunition and food forward along the desert roads tied the pursuers to the ground as surely as if a powerful enemy force opposed them; and the estimate was that columns of trucks would have to churn east and west along the dusty tracks for a fortnight before the armoured

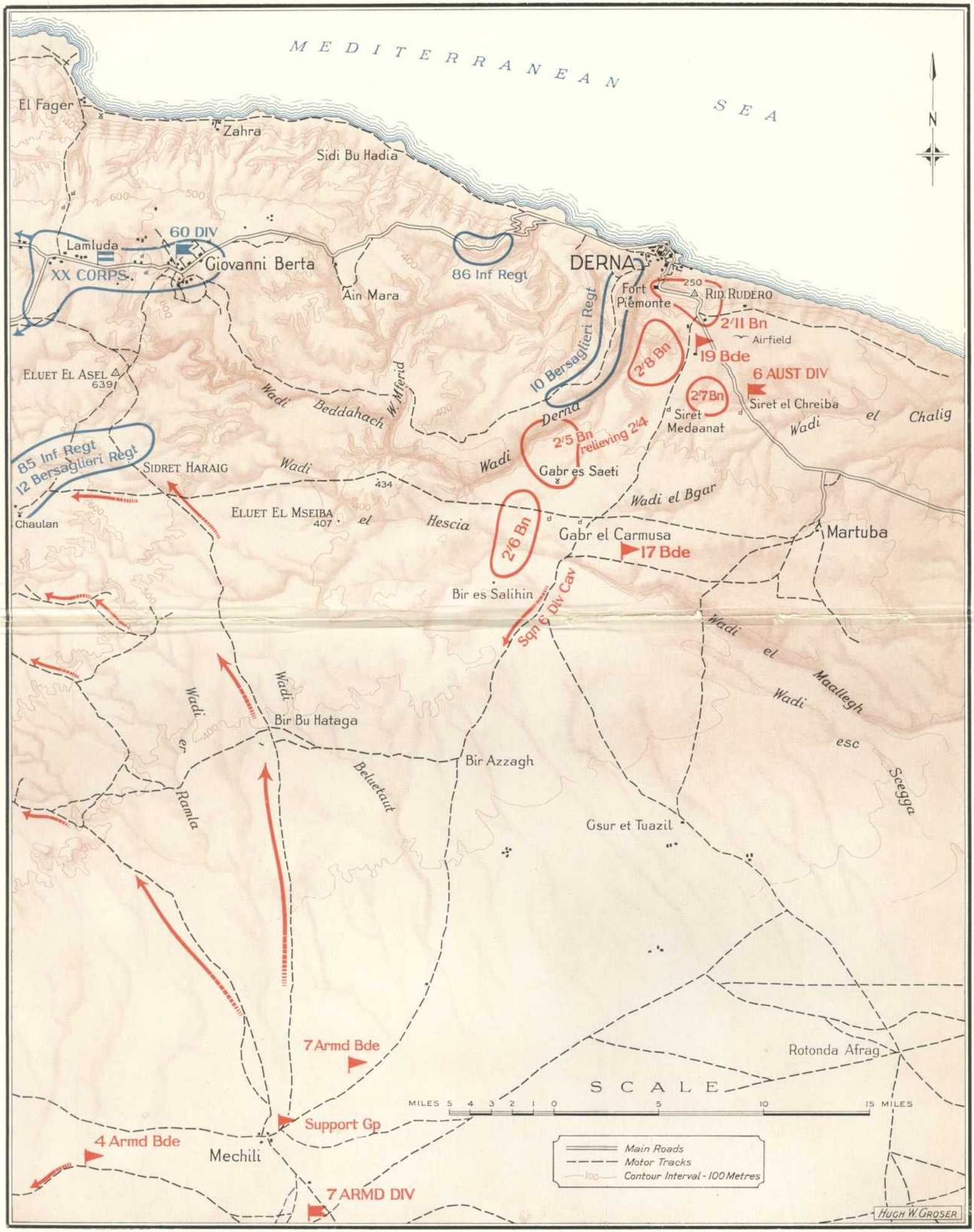
force could advance again. And at the back of O'Connor's mind was now a fear that his advance would be halted so that additional troops could be sent to Greece.

Meanwhile, on the 27th, before Robertson's message cancelling the order to advance on Derna from the south had reached him, Dougherty moved his companies up to make their attack. Captain Rungie's[3] company of Dougherty's battalion and two platoons of machine-gunners of the Northumberland Fusiliers had reached the opposite side of the wadi to join the two companies already there before Dougherty could order them to return. It took so long for the orders to reach the forward troops that the reinforcing company had been on the opposite side for four hours before the return journey began, and it had exchanged shots with a strong party of Italians who dismounted from trucks about 1,200 yards away. Already a strong attack had developed against the two forward companies. McCarty had advanced and was astride the track to Derna more than a mile beyond the top of the wadi when about 400 Italians appeared advancing from the south. McCarty's men—two platoons of about twenty-five each—hurriedly began to build low stone breastworks and prepare to give battle. The Italians attacked with a determination they had seldom shown at Bardia and Tobruk and were reinforced by new arrivals until they numbered more than a thousand. The leading Italians were within 300 yards of the Australians and lapping round the flanks of their position when machine-gunners of the Northumberland Fusiliers arrived, set up their weapons, and opened fire so effectively that the Italians were held. Soon, however, ammunition began to run short and the little force withdrew platoon by platoon to the bank of the wadi, where they joined the other companies, which had also been engaged in the fight, though less severely.

Impressed by the strength of this attack and conscious of the precarious situation of the advanced companies, Dougherty ordered that some trucks be driven to and fro along the Martuba road to create a dust and give the impression that he was being reinforced. The little force across the wadi was indeed in an uncomfortable position of which the Italians were attempting to take full advantage. Ammunition and rations had to be manhandled across the wadi and the journey took several hours. At night the men were so cold that they slept huddled together in the shallow trenches they had dug.

Indeed, the rearguard on the Wadi Derna was now reacting to the Australian thrusts with uncommon determination and enterprise. In the course of the 27th the cavalrymen on the extreme left sent patrols southwards, particularly to discover whether any Italians remained in the area where tanks had been seen the previous day. When the troop led by Sergeant McQuillan[4] reached this point, he saw some Italians moving

[3] Maj M. K. Rungie, NX152; 2/4 Bn. Bank officer; of Junee, NSW; b. Adelaide, 28 Mar 1914.
[4] Sgt V. D. McQuillan, DCM, QX4682; 6 Cav Regt. Clerk; of Ascot, Qld; b. Ascot, 20 Sep 1916. Died of wounds 29 Jan 1941.



The situation at Derna, night 29th-30th January.

about in the distance, and took his carriers and an artillery truck forward to gain a better view. He had just halted when an anti-tank gun and machine-guns opened fire from well-concealed trenches only thirty yards from the leading vehicle. A shell blew one wheel off the truck which escaped in great haste on three wheels and a hub. McQuillan signalled the troop to withdraw, but, as his own carrier turned, it struck a mine which mortally wounded his driver, Ferguson,[5] broke McQuillan's arm and disabled the carrier. After the remaining two carriers had reached the shelter of a wadi 150 yards farther back, Corporal Matchett[6] set out on foot to rescue the wounded McQuillan. McQuillan met him half-way, ordered him to go back to report to Lieutenant Mills (for the batteries of the wireless sets were spent and there was no way of recharging them) while he himself returned to help Ferguson. In the disabled carrier Corporal Teece[7] was still firing his Bren gun at the enemy, who were so close that their bullets were piercing the armour of his cabin.

As soon as Matchett reported, Mills took forward all the carriers he had with him and also a medical truck. He led his vehicles along the cover of a wadi to where the third carrier of McQuillan's troop lay, posted a Vickers gun there to give covering fire and began to go forward on foot but was pinned down by machine-gun fire. Sergeant Martin[8] meanwhile took the medical truck to within twenty yards of the disabled carrier, dismounted and had put McQuillan on a stretcher when Italian fire pinned him to the ground. The Italians then came forward with a white flag and took McQuillan, Martin and two other men prisoners.

Hennessy's troop was equipped with Australian-pattern carriers which had no wireless. Thus, knowing nothing of what had happened he drove forward along the road. One of his carriers saw a warning signal and stopped, but the other two did not halt until they had reached McQuillan's vehicle. There they came under the same cross-fire of Italian anti-tank and machine-guns. As it turned Hennessy's vehicle ran over three mines which failed to explode and he reached cover, having picked up one of the medical orderlies on the way.[9] Sergeant Mills' carrier, however, detonated two mines which disabled the carrier and mortally wounded Mills. Corporal Townsend,[1] the driver, was killed by machine-gun fire; Trooper Murray,[2] the gunner, was blown out of the carrier, and lay low until dark.[3]

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[5] Cpl E. C. Ferguson, QX4082; 6 Cav Regt. Clerk; of Brisbane; b. Hughenden, Qld, 3 Oct 1914. Killed in action 27 Jan 1941.

[6] Cpl L. T. Matchett, NX5637; 6 Cav Regt. Bank clerk; of Bathurst, NSW; b. Goulburn, NSW, 9 Nov 1914.

[7] Cpl N. R. C. Teece, NX532; 6 Cav Regt. Bank clerk; of Sydney; b. Sydney, 14 Apr 1916.

[8] Sgt W. O. Martin, NX521; 6 Cav Regt. Wool classer; of Artarmon, NSW; b. Lambton, NSW, 17 Dec 1915.

[9] The three detonators were examined later. Each percussion cap had been struck fairly by the firing pin.

[1] Cpl W. H. Townsend, NX5523; 6 Cav Regt. Farm labourer; of Bathurst, NSW; b. Eugowra, NSW, 2 Nov 1914. Killed in action 27 Jan 1941.

[2] Tpr T. A. Murray, QX4596; 6 Cav Regt. Bricklayer; of Brisbane; b. Queensland, 21 Feb 1918.

[3] At night he walked in the wrong direction and was found two days later dazed and exhausted.

Eventually the cavalrymen retired, having lost four of the finest N.C.O's in the squadron—McQuillan, Mills, Ferguson and Townsend—killed or mortally wounded, and three other men taken prisoner.[4]

During 27th January the Italians resisted strongly on the heights above the town itself. However, Shanahan's company of the 2/11th captured Fort Rudero, taking 290 prisoners and five field guns in and round the fort, which they held until Italian artillery fire in this open area became so heavy and accurate that Shanahan temporarily withdrew his men to the shelter of near-by wadis. During the night patrols of the 2/11th succeeded in clearing more enemy posts and some field guns from the top of the escarpment.[5] One patrol under Lieutenant Daws found two field guns and some machine-guns which had been abandoned; later in the night a man[6] in this patrol stepped on a mine which killed him and wounded five others. Lieutenant Fleay[7] advanced to the point where the road turns north, capturing three guns and some prisoners. Lieutenant Thomas[8] led a patrol along the ridge north of the road and captured a machine-gun and its crew. Thus, by morning, these ridges on top of the final slope leading down to Derna were in the hands of the West Australians, who could then look down into the town and see every movement on the roads below them. The fact that the ridges had been cleared of the enemy did not, however, reduce the volume of artillery fire which the Italian guns, firing from west of Derna, continued to bring down along the road. "The shelling, judged by 1918 European standards is really heavy," Louch reported to Robertson. "He has more guns and far more shells than we have and his guns are skilfully placed and well served." Whereas the Italian gunners appeared to be firing away accumulated stores of ammunition which would otherwise have to be destroyed when they finally withdrew, the Australian regiments were limited to ten rounds a gun a day. Louch was convinced that an effective attack on Derna from the south-east could not be made without greater artillery support.

Farther to the left on the 2/4th's sector the Italians, on the 28th, attacked the two companies which remained on the western bank, but were repulsed by the infantrymen and by accurate artillery fire from guns of the 2/1st Regiment. Early next morning the Australians encircled and captured four officers and sixty-three men.

Progress on the left flank, however, was rapidly bringing closer the moment when the stubborn rearguard at Derna would have to withdraw so as to avoid being encircled.

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[4] Repeated attempts by Onslow and Lt Mills to reach the disabled carriers were stopped by artillery fire. After the fall of Derna Onslow found the carriers. Ferguson was dead in his seat, Mills dead beside his carrier with a note of farewell scrawled in his diary; Townsend lay dead fifty yards away.

[5] Cpl T. L. Johnson, MM (of Wickepin, WA) distinguished himself in command of a platoon in which his seniors had been killed or wounded.

[6] Pte P. A. L. Rickard (of Roseville, NSW) who was killed had been an officer in the 2/3 Bn, but resigned his commission and joined the 2/11 as a private.

[7] Lt-Col N. L. Fleay, DSO, WX361. 2/11 Bn, CO Kanga Force 1942-43, 2/7 Cav (Cdo) Regt 1944-45. Printer; of Maylands, WA; b. Wagin, WA, 2 Dec 1917.

[8] Lt G. I. Thomas, WX531; 2/11 Bn. Bank officer; of Cottesloe, WA; b. Cottesloe, 5 May 1917.

On that flank, on the evening of the 28th, some armoured cars of the 11th Hussars were in the Chaulan area where they made contact with an Italian force with light guns which was evidently deployed across the tracks leading from the south through the hills to the colony area of Giovanni Berta and Luigi di Savoia. Savige's brigade was now taking up its position on the left flank of the 19th, and farther left the Australian cavalry squadron had established contact with the 11th Hussars. Thus the net which was being swept round the Italians extended in a shallow arc from Derna on the right to the hills south of Giovanni Berta and Slonta. Mackay ordered both brigades to act vigorously with a view to dislodging the enemy. On this left flank the problem was to bring an adequate force within striking distance, because, between his positions along the Wadi Derna and the road to Giovanni Berta from the south, lay twenty miles of tangled hills through which the upper reaches of the wadi cut its way.

Once again, however, General Bergonzoli, now at Giovanni Berta commanding the Italian *XX Corps,* anticipated his enemy's moves. The shelling of the 2/11th's area was particularly heavy during the evening of the 29th, which had been a relatively quiet day. Louch decided this might be a "final flutter" before a withdrawal from Derna and ordered that a patrol be sent forward along the road when the artillery fire ceased late that night. The patrol was fired upon. In the early hours of the morning of the 30th fires were seen blazing in Derna. Lieutenant Johnson thereupon led a patrol towards the southern edge of the town but it, too, was fired on by a machine-gun. However, soon after daylight, a party of Libyans climbed up the scarp and informed Louch that the Italians had gone. Louch sent a patrol down the way the Libyans had come and, as soon as he had seen that they entered the town without opposition, he sent one company along the road, in which a large crater had been blown, and another clambering down the escarpment.

At Derna the desert ended. A town of some 10,000 people, it was the eastern outpost of the area of the Italian colonial settlements which extended over the Jebel Achdar and included the fertile plains round Barce and Benghazi. Its well-designed box-like houses stood in green shady gardens fed with water from the wadi. The gardens were bright with flowers, and cauliflowers, radishes and onions were growing—the first fresh food the Australians had seen for more than a month. As the infantrymen entered the town it appeared to have been deserted except by small bands of Arabs who were industriously piling loot on to the backs of donkeys—cases of food, sewing machines, tables and chairs, sideboards filled with cutlery. Little damage had been done by air bombardment and the houses appeared to have been abandoned in haste some days before.

The invading force had now entered the more settled area of Cyrenaica. Since the desert tribes had been brought under control—a task virtually completed by the occupation of the outlying oases in 1931—the Italian Government had organised immigration into Libya with the object of

increasing the military strength of the colony. The aim was to establish 500,000 Italians in the North African colonies and, in 1938, 18,000 immigrants were established in Libya in ready-made settlements in which houses and community settlements had been built and water pipes laid before the new settlers arrived. The settlement plan was not on a large scale compared with similar enterprises in America and Australia, but by 1940 the civil population included some 90,000 Italians and 6,000 other Europeans in a total population of 890,000. Thus at Derna a problem of civil administration faced the Australians for the first time. Wholesale looting by the Libyans was quickly stopped by patrols of the 2/11th and by the provosts of the 6th Division, but, as more units passed through the town, small parties both of Australian and British troops carried on the work the Libyans had begun. There were sharp complaints at O'Connor's headquarters that the Australians had "looted Derna". The facts are that the town was promptly policed from the day that the 2/11th entered. On that day twelve Australians were arrested and charged with having stolen watches, fowls or wine. Captain Hawker, the Australian deputy-assistant provost-marshal, knowing that his force was being maligned by itinerant staff officers, interrogated many of the Libyan townspeople and reached the conclusion that the town had already been looted on four separate occasions: first, by the Italian troops when the civilians were removed; secondly, when the Italian military police were withdrawn and Libyan police were left in charge; thirdly, when the native police were withdrawn; and fourthly, by the Arabs when the garrison left the town. Such looting as occurred in the almost-empty town in the twenty-four hours after the arrival of the Australians was a fifth and relatively unimportant instalment.[9] However, General Mackay, who arrived at Derna on the 31st, was persuaded by what he saw that the provosts were neither entirely preventing pillaging nor properly directing the traffic which now began to pour through the town. For a time he himself took up a position at a corner and directed the long line of trucks which carried the 19th Brigade and the units attached to it through Derna. He was probably not aware of the extent to which Derna had been plundered before his men arrived, but there can be no doubt that he had solid ground for concern about the road discipline of the division. The absence of attack from the air, the long distances to be covered, and the consequent difficulty of adequately policing the road had led to crowding and fast driving.

> Road discipline was appalling (wrote one diarist). No attempt to police or to reserve the road. The A.S.C. are the worst offenders, closely followed by the R.A.A.F. and divisional headquarters.

[9] After Derna, Louch, in civil life a leading lawyer of Perth, no doubt chafing under criticism of his men, wrote in his battalion's diary: "So long as senior officers and headquarters messes see nothing wrong in laying in supplies of food and drink it will be difficult to deal with the man who takes a bottle of wine . . . . There can be no solution to the problem till the people who ought to know better set an example . . . . What is and what is not permissible by a soldier off duty in a town which has just been abandoned by the civil populace is a problem to which I have been unable to find any satisfactory answer."

As a sequel to his observations on this occasion Mackay sent a memorandum to all commanding officers giving detailed instructions concerning the management of road traffic. In the course of this he pointed out that, despite the "record job" of the engineers in opening a road to Derna,[1] the advance of the 19th Brigade was delayed by the "cluttering of the road by small unauthorised captured Fiat cars burning Australian Government petrol and driven by officers and others," by drivers stopping their vehicles on the road instead of drawing to the side, by Arabs with donkeys, by signal-laying vehicles and other transgressors.

Encouraging though it was for the brigade on the right to see the end of the long and uncomfortable engagement on the heights east and south of Derna, the fact that the Italians had abandoned the town did not guarantee that they would not make an equally determined stand in the rugged country farther west and on the 30th, the day the town was entered, Mackay had ordered the two brigades (for Savige's was now in position on the left) on the 31st to advance on a wide front to a line from Sidi Bu Hadia (on the coast road west of Derna), through Ain Mara (on a branch track two miles south of the main mountain road) to Hill 407, two miles south of the Martuba-Giovanni Berta track. At the same time Onslow's cavalry squadron was ordered to establish daylight patrols on the Giovanni Berta-Mechili road, south from the road junction near Sidret Haraig. The immediate object of this advance, which would take the forward battalions to positions fifteen miles beyond Derna, was to secure the town against artillery fire and ensure control of the Giovanni Berta-Mechili road. The boundary between the two brigades ran between the mountain road and the Martuba road. Robertson therefore ordered his freshest battalion, the 2/8th, through Derna (where the 2/11th remained as a police force) and along the main road, while one company of the 2/4th advanced along the coast road towards Sidi Bu Hadia; the remainder of that battalion followed the 2/8th.

As if to proclaim that the desert had ended, it began to rain and blow on the morning of the 31st as the 2/8th moved through Derna. Beyond the town they advanced along the narrow plain between the mountains and the sea. About three miles beyond the the town the leading companies were shelled by Italian guns on the heights above them and the advance slowed down. It was then 1 p.m.; by 4 p.m. the battalion had moved forward about a mile and was close to the point where the road began to climb the face of the escarpment. Farther on a newer by-pass road also climbed the escarpment, linking with the old road on top; both had probably been cratered. The leading companies came under accurate fire from four or five machine-guns on the forward slopes of the hills. A troop of 25-pounders of the Royal Horse Artillery was now close behind the infantry and the guns of the 2/1st Field Regiment were also in action farther back, but the Italian rearguard, though small, was in a dominating position and

[1] The 2/8 Fd Coy and working parties from the 2/8 and 2/11 Bns repaired the road by 11 a.m. on the 31st.

Colonel Mitchell, who was with the leading companies, decided to wait until dark before attempting to send his men up the 700-foot slope which the old road—a mere ledge—climbed in a series of sharp zigzags. He ordered Captain J. A. H. Smith's company to advance in the night and capture the Italian guns; the rest of the battalion would follow.

At 8 o'clock Smith's company moved off, with Lieutenant Diffey's[2] platoon leading. Two scouts went first followed by the rest of the platoon in single file with ten paces between each man, all hugging the cliff both for protection and to make sure of not falling over the outer edge of the road. The remainder of Smith's company followed, then came two more companies, also in single file. Silent, and in pale moonlight, the long line of about 300 men wound up the road. Footsteps were heard ahead of Diffey and the scouts, and out of the gloom appeared an Italian with a machine-gun on his shoulder. *"Alt, chi va là!"* said Diffey quietly. The scouts seized him, took his gun and pistol and made signs that he would have to march back up the hill with them. The Italian opened his mouth to cry out, whereupon Diffey grasped him by the throat with one hand and, with the other, hit him so hard with the butt of his pistol that he broke it. A few minutes later another Italian appeared, but he saw the Australians before they could grasp him, dropped over the lower side of the road and made off towards the gun positions on the opposite side of the deep gully.

As they went on up the hill, crossing a large crater which the Italians had blown in the road, the Australians could hear Italians talking on an opposite face of the escarpment where the new road wound up it. Then Diffey's foot scraped metal—a land mine, he was sure, because he could see that the surface of the road had been disturbed. He halted the column, went back along the line to warn Smith, and the word was passed back. The leaders found that there were so many mines that to disarm them would have delayed the advance too long, so Diffey stood on one or two to make sure that a man's tread would not detonate them, and continued the climb.[3]

Without further incident the column reached the top where the leading men completely surprised fifty Italians in an old fort there and made them prisoners. At the same time the Australians could hear trucks being driven away from the Italian gun positions beyond. Diffey, surmising that the man he had failed to capture had warned the gunners, obtained permission to take his platoon forward and capture the crews at the road junction. However, by the time he reached it the Italians had gone, though he could hear the hammering of a pneumatic drill farther along the main road. Dawn was breaking as he led his platoon on in single file. They had gone only a few hundred yards in the half light when a storm of fire broke out from the Italian rearguard only 250 yards ahead. The men went to ground and, as they lay, saw dimly the shapes of two tanks, and decided

[2] Maj S. C. Diffey, MC, VX6596; 2/8 Bn. Farmer; of Springhurst, Vic; b. Springhurst, 2 Apr 1917.

[3] Next day engineers under Lt L. T. Frazer disarmed 182 mines on the road, all in a stretch of 50 yards. A whole battalion had walked over them.

that at least a dozen machine-guns were being fired at them. The fire ceased after about five minutes. The Australians lay for another ten minutes, and then Diffey dribbled his men back to the crossroads. Artillery fire was brought down on the enemy rearguard by guns of the 2/1st Regiment which were still at the bottom of the escarpment and this soon drove out the Italians. Thus, without a casualty, the escarpment was climbed and ahead of the Australians wound the road that travels 100 miles across the green and wooded Jebel.

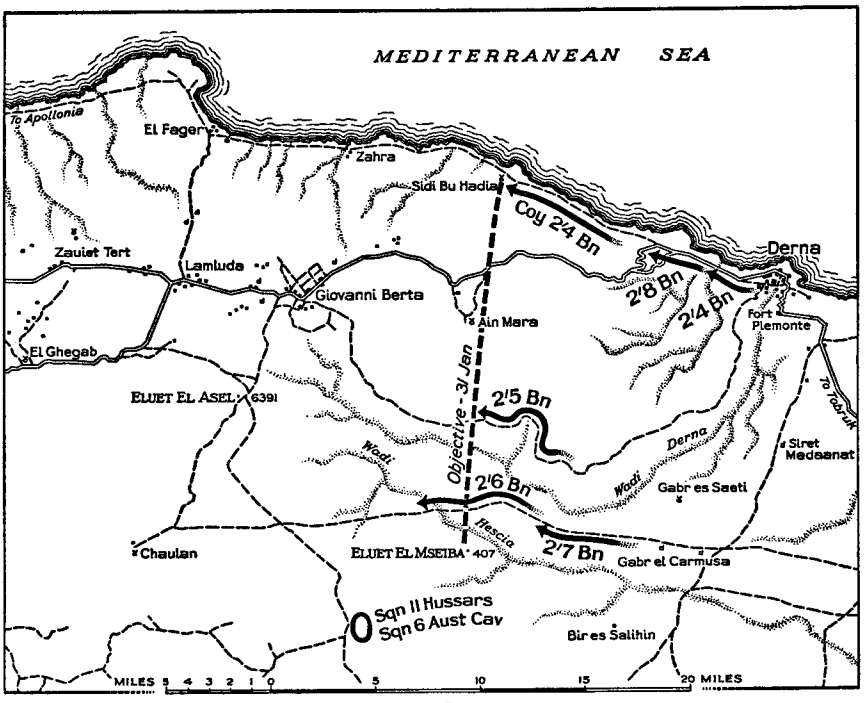
Behind the leading infantry companies, however, lay the crater in the road, an obstacle which their supply trucks and the guns could not negotiate; and, in the morning, it was discovered that the new road had been blocked by no fewer than four craters.

Mackay had originally intended that both Robertson and Savige should reach their objectives on 31st January. It was now 1st February and the 19th Brigade, with a battalion of infantry on top of the escarpment but the guns and trucks immobilised at its foot, faced another day's delay while the road was mended. The 17th Brigade, out on the left in the tangle of hills in which the Wadi Derna rises, had been able to make somewhat greater progress.

By the morning of the 30th Savige's brigade had taken up a position on a front some nine miles astride and south of the Wadi Derna. On the right two companies of the 2/5th were on the far side of the wadi; on the left the 2/6th extended the front to near Bir es Salihin. Savige's problem was to find a place where his vehicles could cross the wadi so that, in obedience to Mackay's orders, he could take his place on the left flank of the 19th Brigade. The map showed that, once a crossing had been found, his vehicles could move along the track on the far side of the wadi, linking Giovanni Berta and Derna—the track towards which the 2/4th Battalion had been fighting before the 2/5th Battalion had relieved it. Savige's plan was to form two forces each of a battalion plus artillery, engineer and machine-gun sub-units. The 2/5th Battalion group was to advance on the north side of the wadi, the 2/6th Battalion group on the south side. The 2/7th was in reserve.

By the morning of 31st January, Savige was in a position similar to that in which Robertson found himself the following day. Each had several companies of foot-soldiers on the far side of an obstacle which their vehicles and their artillery could not cross. During the 31st King had sent his remaining riflemen across the wadi, the men carrying their rifles, Bren and anti-tank rifles. They marched west in the direction of Giovanni Berta, while their trucks and the field guns and the machine-guns (of the 1/Cheshire) which Savige had placed under King's command, kept pace on the southern side. At dusk the companies were due south of Ain Mara. King intended to continue to advance in the darkness, but there was firing ahead and he decided to halt until morning. The night was bitterly cold and the weary men, who had left behind their greatcoats, blankets and even their jerkins when they set out on the hard march, were able to get little sleep.

The firing which had halted King's men was aimed not at them but at carriers of the 2/6th Battalion. In the morning the advance-guard of this battalion, marching west, had reached the minefield on which the cavalry squadron had been ambushed on the 27th with two wrecked carriers still lying there. Major Porter[4] sent three of his companies through a gap in the minefield while the fourth moved along the lip of the wadi seeking a crossing. By 5 p.m. the head of the 2/6th was astride the track at the head of the Wadi Hescia, beyond the day's objective. Its carriers,

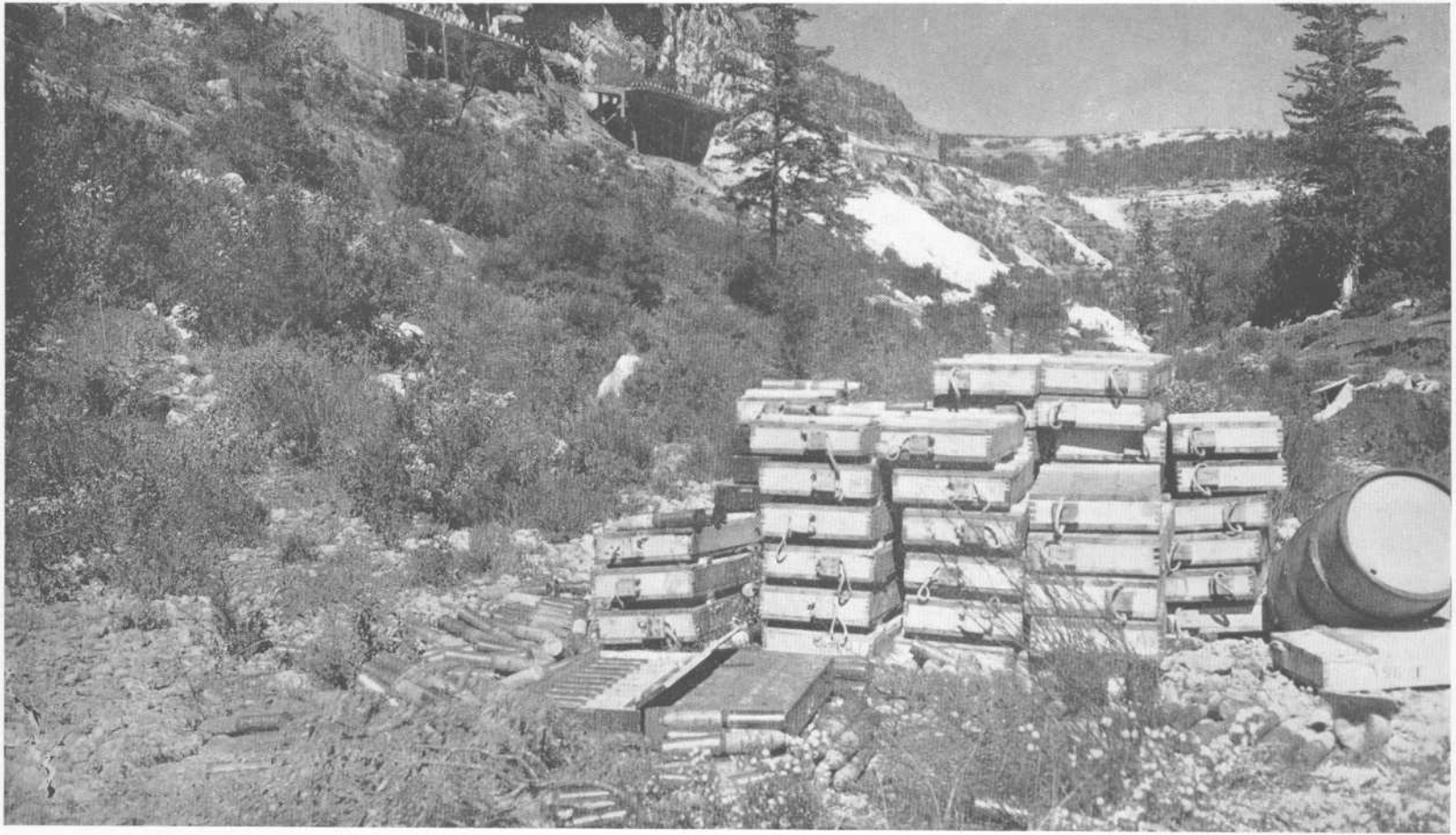


Dusk 31st January.

under Lieutenant Warfe, patrolling forward, came under a sudden burst of fire from the anti-tank guns and machine-guns of an Italian force which was evidently holding this approach. Warfe, with characteristic dash and quick thinking, led his carriers forward to the cover of a small depression, and then manoeuvred his own vehicle into position to fire on the Italian guns while the other carriers withdrew.

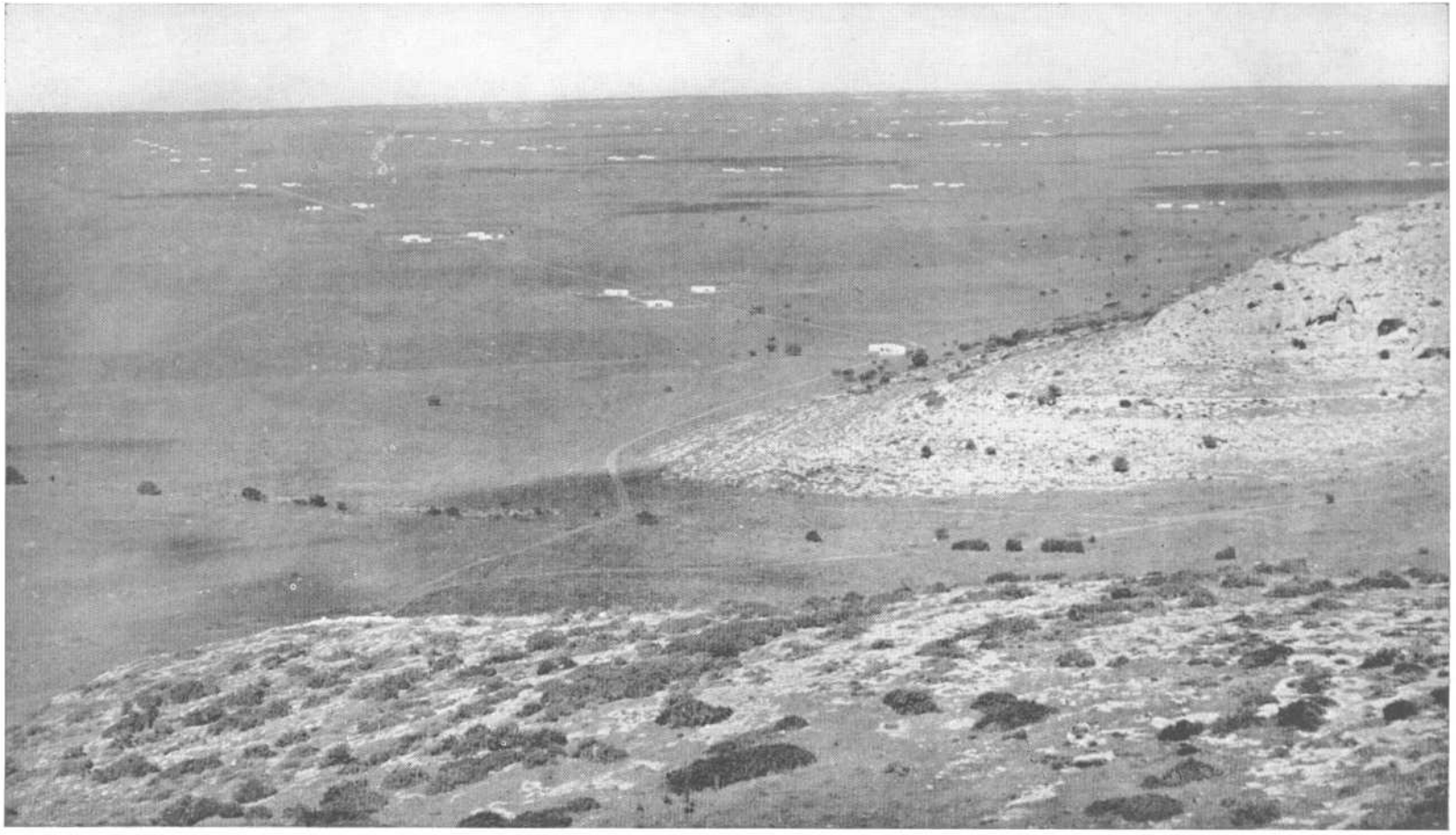
Late that night Savige ordered that the reserve battalion, the 2/7th (which had already marched twenty miles during the day), should move to the wadi bank between the 2/5th and 2/6th and form a chain of men along which rations and water could be passed across the wadi to the 2/5th. This added another five miles and a half to the march of the

[4] Porter had replaced Godfrey who had been given charge of Tobruk Fortress.



A small ammunition dump abandoned by the retreating Italians near the Wadi Cuff.

(Australian War Memorial photo)



(Australian War Memorial photo)

Looking down from a hill near Barce over the Italian colonial settlements, February 1941.

2/7th, this portion of it made in the dark, steering by compass, over tangled rock-strewn country which they had not reconnoitred. On the morning of the 1st February the 2/6th attacked.

Porter's plan was to attack with two rifle companies supported by artillery and his carrier platoon. The initial move was to place a company in a suitable position to attack and one which would cover a knoll from which the artillery observer would direct fire. The carriers would then swing round the right flank over the ground they had fought on the night before. When the attackers were in position Warfe's carriers and the left company moved forward, and the enemy fled. The right company moved in deployed formation and swung their right flank round the enemy troops, capturing more than 380 and establishing a bridgehead to cover the track from the north side of the wadi.

Savige's task was now to advance through Eluet el Asel, an Italian fort astride the track to Giovanni Berta, and on to the town itself. Since no crossing over the Wadi Derna had been found over which trucks could be driven to the 2/5th Battalion, Mackay agreed with Savige that it should return to the south side. However, the order did not reach King, who had no wireless, until late in the afternoon, five hours after it had been given. This left no time for King to inform Savige that he had found an Italian supply dump containing rations and blankets and that he was drawing water from springs and thus could continue to advance along the north side of the wadi without his vehicles.

On the night of the 1st Savige ordered Walker of the 2/7th to lead the advance next morning, supported by the 2/2nd Field Regiment, some anti-tank guns and a company of machine-gunners. However, next morning Colonel Combe[5] of the 11th Hussars, who were patrolling in the neighbourhood of Eluet el Asel, reported that the enemy appeared to have gone during the night (as both he and Savige had predicted during the conferences at Mackay's headquarters the previous day). Thus, soon after midday, a patrol of the 2/7th entered the fort, where an Arab informed them that, during the night, Italians had withdrawn not only from the fort but from Giovanni Berta itself. About the same time the enemy abandoned Chaulan, which the Hussars entered that afternoon. Three hours later carriers of the 2/7th Battalion and Onslow's cavalry carriers entered Giovanni Berta. It was a well-built little place with a normal population of 800, a handsome church (whose priest stayed at his post) and offices. The few Arabs who were there waved white flags and welcomed the Australians with cognac, eggs and fruit. Onslow tapped into the Italian telephone line and heard a girl operator, evidently at Benghazi exchange, call "Benghazi". On Savige's orders he cut the lines to prevent information reaching Italians east of the town or in the town itself. That evening companies of the 2/7th, which had marched twenty-four miles in the day, were on the main road east of the town, the 2/6th was astride

[5] Maj-Gen J. F. B. Combe, CB, DSO. CO 11 Hussars 1940-41; GOC 78 and 46 Divs. Regular soldier; b. 1 Aug 1895.

the road a mile to the west, and Savige's headquarters were in the Giovanni Berta school.

The break in the road up the escarpment which had delayed the 19th Brigade had been mended and, during the 2nd, the 2/8th Battalion had advanced to within seven miles of Giovanni Berta, having been briefly delayed by a demolished bridge and a minefield near the turn-off to Ain Mara. All that Robertson knew that evening of the progress of the 17th Brigade was that (according to an out-dated message) it was some miles south of Giovanni Berta, on which the supporting artillery was to fire at 3 p.m.[6] A native told his forward troops late in the afternoon that there were no Italian troops left in the town.

In fact the pincers had closed on thin air. Before the weary infantry had reached Giovanni Berta the pilots of the Hurricanes flying over the road leading west had brought back reports that suggested that a large-scale withdrawal was in progress. They had seen no Italian vehicles east of Slonta, thirty-five miles farther along the road; already the armoured division had sent a force towards Slonta along the road leading to it from the south.

On 2nd February Mackay sent instructions to Savige to move next morning along the El Faidia road, and Robertson along the Cyrene road. Savige was to move first and, since the two brigades would use the same road as far as the fork beyond Lamluda, he ordered Robertson not to move until 10 a.m., by which time Savige had to be clear of Giovanni Berta. The objective for the day was a north-south line through El Ghegab. The warning order for this move did not reach Savige until a liaison officer brought it to him at 8 p.m. on the 2nd. He told this officer to tell the divisional staff that he was prepared to move but there was little prospect of all units being concentrated and on the road before midday. The men of the 2/7th were footsore; boots and socks were worn through, legs were chafed, and feet and ankles were bruised and blistered. The marches which the battalions of the 17th Brigade had achieved in the three days before the occupation of Giovanni Berta—the 2/7th, for example, covered seventy miles in three days—would have severely tested the fittest of troops if they had been made over flat or undulating country. In the tangled country at the eastern end of the Jebel Achdar, cut with rocky ravines, over stones and through dust, the nights so cold that sleep was difficult except for utterly weary men, the marches were a notable feat of endurance and a demonstration of the hardiness and high spirit of the troops.

Men with chafed legs were marching without trousers in the cold wind (wrote one diarist). Their spirit was magnificent. At every stop feet were plastered and ankles strapped.

[6] Savige did not learn of this program, which included fire by medium guns on Eluet el Asel, until 2.40 when many of his troops were in the el Asel area. Fortunately his wireless signals got through and the shoot was cancelled.

Mackay was aware of the fatigue of the brigade and told Savige that he hoped that the men would have some rest on the night of the 3rd. In the meantime they must press on as soon as possible. However, as Savige had predicted, his battalions were not clear of Giovanni Berta by 10 a.m. It was 8.45 a.m. before a crossing could be made over the anti-tank ditch which the Italians had cut across the road west of the town, and 3 p.m. before the last vehicle of the brigade was over it. During the afternoon the 2/6th, having marched fifteen miles, was astride the roads at El Ghegab.

In the morning the cavalry squadron also set out in their carriers along the road leading west. Beyond Giovanni Berta the rocky, lightly-timbered hills carry scattered areas of good soil and, on these, groups of Italian peasants had been settled in colonies whose names perpetuated the memories of Fascist notables. As the cavalrymen rattled along the road they saw the first cultivated land west of the Nile Delta, excepting the gardens at Derna and the oases far inland in the desert. Beside the road at every half mile or so stood a square white house in a cultivated field with a few cattle grazing. The farmer and his family stood glumly at the door of each farm and when soldiers walked over to question them, either in French or in a few halting words of Italian, the householder, perhaps truthfully, perhaps anxious to please the newcomers, would explain that he did not love Mussolini and the Fascists, that he was an exile and wanted to go home. A few miles farther on the cavalrymen reached Luigi di Savoia, where the farm houses were set close together on each side of the road. On every wicket gate a white cloth was waving and some householders were flying pillowslips and sheets on poles above their roofs. The settlers soon overcame their fear of the new arrivals and, as the cavalrymen halted their carriers, they gathered round them talking and gesticulating. They explained with eloquent gestures that as soon as their own soldiers had gone the Arabs had begun to loot the settlement. The storekeeper had locked the store, whereupon the Arabs had set it alight. They had no weapons with which to defend themselves against the marauders. Effusive and artless, they crowded round the stolid, smiling soldiers and made indignant speeches in Italian. When they found that the Australians were genial and evidently intended no harm, the women ran back into the houses and returned carrying bread and vegetables, bottles of home-made red wine and handfuls of glasses. Meanwhile cloaked Arabs were moving silently and purposefully in the background, entering the houses through the back doors. They loftily disregarded the indignant shouts of the Italians and, when an Australian chased one away, he would circle round and approach from another angle.

In the afternoon Onslow, having decided that there were no enemy troops for some distance ahead, took a truckload of men into Cyrene. They drove through the deserted streets of the modern Italian town which stands on a hill above the amphitheatre and broken walls and columns of the ancient Graeco-Roman city. The large hotel standing on the summit of the hill overlooking the rolling plain that leads to Apollonia, the

seaport of Cyrene, was shut and empty. A few Arabs, some in European clothing and some in robes, were wandering about the town, but Onslow found no Italians there.

In the Derna-Mechili area General Bergonzoli commanded the Italian *XX Corps* 39,000 strong, with headquarters near Giovanni Berta. At Mechili he reinforced Babini's three tank battalions with the *85th Regiment* (two motorised battalions) and two artillery regiments, one from the *60th* and one robbed from the *17th Division* in Tripolitania. On his left, holding Derna and the wadi, was the *86th Regiment*. The headquarters of the *60th Division* (General Della Bona), to which the *85th* and *86th* belonged, was at Giovanni Berta. The motorised battalions of the *10th BersaglieriRegiment* appear to have formed the rearguard for the *60th Division* during the withdrawal from Derna and Giovanni Berta. The main bodies of the *17th* (*Pavia*) and *27th* (*Brescia*) *Divisions*, suspected by the British staff to be in Cyrenaica, were still in Tripolitania. But the machine-gun battalions of the four divisions in Tripolitania and the field artillery regiments of three of them had been sent to Cyrenaica.

CHAPTER 11

BEDA FOMM AND BENGHAZI

THE troops on the ground made no contact with the enemy on 3rd February, but the pilots of scouting aircraft brought in increasing evidence that the Italians were withdrawing from what was left to them of Cyrenaica. They had seen columns of vehicles moving west from Luigi Razza, Maraua and even Marsa Brega, 150 miles south of Benghazi; more significantly the enemy had evidently abandoned the aerodromes at and near Benghazi. General O'Connor had decided late on the 2nd that if he struck with his armoured force (as he had planned) on 12th February, it would be too late, and therefore ordered General Creagh straightway to move his division to Msus whence it could advance to Soluch across the line of the Italian retreat. At the same time he ordered General Mackay to continue to pursue the enemy along the roads that led over the Jebel Achdar, ferrying forward a unit at a time if need be.

In response to this instruction Mackay on the 3rd ordered Brigadier Savige to move one battalion forward the following day to Slonta to relieve a detachment of the armoured division, and another to Luigi di Savoia on the northern road. Thereupon Savige ordered King of the 2/5th to occupy Cyrene next day, Walker of the 2/7th to occupy El Faidia, and placed Porter of the 2/6th in command of a column, including that battalion and detachments of artillery, engineers and machine-gunners, to advance to Slonta. (In fact the armoured detachment had found the Mechili-Slonta track impassable and had not reached Slonta.)

In the meantime, however, Robertson, chafing at the delay imposed on his brigade and anxious to hasten the pursuit and to lead it, urged Mackay that the next move should be made by a fully-motorised force if the enemy was to be caught. Mackay told Robertson to spend the rest of the day on vehicle maintenance but to be ready to advance at short notice.

An infantry division did not possess enough motor vehicles to move all its men and equipment on wheels at the same time; it was a force of foot-soldiers attended by trucks and vans which transported heavy equipment and supplies. About one-third of its men normally rode in these vehicles, but to each infantry platoon of, say, thirty men there was only one truck, the conventional duty of which was to carry the heavy weapons, ammunition and rations. An infantry battalion could be motorised only by the employment of a reserve motor transport company or by borrowing vehicles from other units and thus, for the time, immobilising those units. By "cannibalisation", by commandeering of captured Italian trucks, and employing the trucks of the 16th Brigade now stationary at Tobruk (its proposed move to Mechili had been cancelled), the 6th Division had contrived to maintain enough vehicles to keep it supplied with its needs and, when troops had to be moved forward rapidly over long distances, to transport a brigade at a time. Mackay could now continue the advance

at top speed only by reducing his six forward battalions (three having already been left behind in Tobruk) to three.

Savige's battalions began moving forward early on the morning of 4th February, the 2/6th in trucks provided by divisional headquarters, the 2/7th in trucks lent by his attached artillery regiment (the 2/2nd) and the 2/5th on foot. Savige then went to Mackay's headquarters to propose that he should move forward the part of his brigade that was now on wheels as fast as possible. However, when he arrived at divisional headquarters at Giovanni Berta he found that Robertson had already been summoned and ordered to embus his whole brigade (which was fresher than Savige's) in vehicles being collected from the artillery and the services, to pass through Savige's brigade and take up the pursuit. Already instructions were on their way to Porter's force, which was then leading the advance, to push on to Slonta as soon as it could and send its vehicles back to help in moving the 19th Brigade. This decision disappointed Savige, who pointed out to Mackay that he was nearer Barce than Robertson and already had enough transport to lift two of his three battalions. "A sense of real disappointment was felt and expressed at missing this opportunity," he wrote later.

However, by midday, Robertson's leading battalion, the 2/8th, was on the move, and by 4 p.m. the whole brigade group was rolling briskly along the smooth Slonta-Barce road in a column twenty-five miles in length, with some armoured cars of the 11th Hussars and a troop of the 6th Divisional Cavalry leading the way. The weary infantrymen who had now been marching and fighting with little rest since the 25th, lay closely packed on the floors of the vehicles and slept; all that could be seen of them were rows of boot-soles bouncing in time to the movements of the trucks. The long convoy travelled along, halted, then moved on again, in response to the checks that are inevitable to a long convoy when speed is not regular, and because occasional halts had to be made while land mines or barricades of boulders were removed from the road. After leaving the settlements at Luigi di Savoia the southern road passed through well-timbered country with grass growing between patches of flat rock. For a few miles there would be no sign of habitation, and then a single white farmhouse or a crumbling fort. At intervals a truck, wrecked and overturned by the roadside, showed where a retreating Italian column had been hit by one of the Hurricanes which, unseen by the pursuing infantry, were strafing the enemy convoys. At a few points along the road were signs that the Italian commanders had ordered that a rearguard position be prepared and had changed their minds: an anti-tank ditch half-dug, or an abandoned dump of ammunition.

At Slonta, a group of old thick-walled barracks, the head of Robertson's column passed the 2/6th Battalion of Savige's brigade. Thence, in the late afternoon, it moved on through Maraua and Tecnis. Three miles beyond Tecnis, as the three British armoured cars leading the column rounded a bend in the road, they came upon a group of Italian soldiers laying mines in the road. These ran into the bush as the cars approached. The

Hussars climbed out of their vehicles and were removing the mines when, from only a few hundred yards ahead, light guns and machine-guns began firing accurately and fast. In a minute the three armoured cars were disabled or destroyed and a truck in which two war correspondents and a conducting officer were travelling was riddled.[1] As soon as the leading infantry about a mile behind heard the firing, they jumped from their trucks and deployed across the road. The ambush took place at 6.20 and the light was fading as the infantry began to advance, one company on each side of the road, and the long column stationary behind them. Robertson, fearing that the task of the Italian rearguard had been to delay him while craters were blown in the road winding down the escarpment ten miles ahead, ordered Colonel Mitchell to push on during the night. He did so, but towards midnight, when the leading companies were still only three miles beyond the ambush, a long rumbling explosion was heard in the distance; and Mitchell and Anderson,[2] Robertson's brigade-major who was forward at Mitchell's headquarters, guessed that a stretch of the steep road leading down to Barce had been blown up.

Meanwhile the task of advancing along the road to Apollonia and along the northern of the two roads that crossed the Jebel Achdar had been entrusted to Onslow's squadron, less two troops which were with Robertson. Onslow himself led a small party which drove along the road towards Apollonia until it reached a point where a gap had been blown in the road. Thence he with Captain Eden[3] of the Royal Horse Artillery and four others walked forward on foot and were met on the outskirts of the town by the mayor and leading townsmen who received them with courtesy and gave them a meal. Onslow's party hoisted an Australian flag and marched back to the break in the road, followed by a procession of townspeople.

Lieutenant Mills, with one troop, drove along the northern road through Beda Littoria and on to the larger colony of Luigi Razza where they overtook a party of 300 Italian troops plodding along the road in formation. When a burst of machine-gun bullets was fired over them the Italians surrendered. They were a remnant of the *86th Regiment* which had fired on the cavalrymen's medical aid post in the ambush at the Wadi Derna and on whom they had sworn revenge, but having caught these dejected men the pursuers felt only pity for them. Mills sent two of his carriers back with the prisoners while the remainder advanced and found the road broken beyond repair where it crossed the wide and rugged Wadi Cuff about five miles south-west of the settlement. The mayor and the priest of Luigi Razza asked for protection against the Arabs who were roaming through the settlement, and nine cavalrymen were left to spend the night there. They ate at the café (where they paid with lire found in the Italian camps at Bardia and Tobruk) while a band of settlers whom the

[1] They were Alexander Clifford (London *Daily Mail*), Alan Moorehead (an Australian representing the *Daily Express*) and Capt Geoffrey Keating. Keating, Clifford and their driver were wounded.

[2] Lt-Col R. K. Anderson, DSO, WX3. 2/11 Bn and CO 2/32 Bn. Regular soldier; of South Perth, WA; b. Mount Clen, Ballarat, Vic, 22 Jun 1901. Died of wounds 26 Jul 1941.

[3] Col R. A. Eden, DSO, RA. Regular soldier; b. Caversham, Oxon, Eng, 1 Aug 1912.

Australians armed with captured Italian swords patrolled the town; the cavalrymen themselves fired a few rounds of tracer ammunition into the air now and then to inform the Arabs of their presence.

At dawn on the same day—the 4th—the armoured division, its strength now reduced to forty or fifty cruiser and eighty light tanks—the equivalent of only one brigade—and with only two days' rations, set off from Mechili over the stony foothills of the Jebel. For the first fifty miles the surface was strewn with boulders and there were occasional patches of soft sand. Some trucks broke down, but beyond Bir el Gerrari the track was smoother. The dust was so dense that groups of vehicles lost their way and did not rejoin the column until hours later. At 3 p.m. the advance-guard (one squadron of the 11th Hussars) reached Msus and engaged the garrison of twenty native troops who eventually made off in two lorries. The Hussars advanced thirty miles along the Antelat track that evening. Harding, O'Connor's chief staff officer, had flown to Creagh's head-quarters and agreed that Creagh should send a force not only west to Soluch but south-west through Antelat to block the retreating Italians. Thereupon he detached a flying column (named "Jockforce" after its commander Lieut-Colonel "Jock" Campbell[4]) consisting of the 2/Rifle Brigade and two batteries of artillery, to move forward, come under the command of Colonel Combe of the 11th Hussars at Msus, and hasten to the Sidi Saleh area to block the Benghazi-Agedabia road. At nightfall on the 4th this column was at Msus, advanced headquarters of the division and the remainder of the 4th Brigade four miles east.

Early on the 5th reconnaissance aircraft reported that long columns of vehicles were moving south along the Benghazi-Marsa Brega road. At midday vehicles were seen moving from El Abiar to Benina and dumps were burning near the jetties at Benghazi. It was reported that there were small enemy flank guards at El Abiar, Sceleidima and Soluch. It was evident that what remained of the Italian *Tenth Army* was in full retreat towards Tripolitania.

Meanwhile, when the head of the 2/8th Battalion neared the edge of the tableland on the morning of the 5th they saw a new land spreading out from the base of the 600-foot escarpment—an orderly green patch-work of flat farmland, cut by straight roads and scattered with square white houses. Half-way to the horizon was the large town of Barce, a meeting place of three roads and a railway. This belt of green country was part of a fertile shelf fifteen to twenty miles wide between the Jebel and a final escarpment leading down to a narrow coastal ledge. To reach the plain the road falls steeply down the western wall of the Jebel and there, the infantrymen found, the Italian rearguard had blown six large craters in the road and destroyed a bridge—damage so severe that the engineers estimated that it would take days to mend it, not hours as at

[4] Maj-Gen J. C. Campbell, VC, DSO, MC. CO 4 RHA 1941; Comd 7 Sup Gp 1941-42. 7 Armd Div 1942. B. 10 Jan 1894. Killed in car accident March 1942.

Derna. As the leading platoon was climbing down the broken road a large and dusty man, bare-headed and wearing a leather flying jacket appeared at the side of the road. He was a Hurricane pilot who had been strafing Italian trucks near Barce the previous morning when an Italian fighter attacked him. He shot it down but his aircraft received so many hits that he was forced to land. He said that, from a hiding place beside the Tocra road, he had watched Italian vehicles streaming past all night until 3 a.m. After that the roads were empty.

Early in the afternoon, Onslow reported that he had reconnoitred an alternative track to the plain and found it passable. This road wound its way south over the tableland towards El Abiar, and along it Robertson sent the trucks carrying the 2/4th and 2/11th Battalions, leaving the 2/8th on the main road to advance by way of Barce and Tocra if it could. Seven miles from the main road the leading infantry vehicle mistakenly turned left into a side track and some delay and confusion resulted, but by dusk the main part of the brigade group was on the plain and preparing to bivouac in wheatfields among stacks of hay.

In the meantime engineers of the 2/8th Field Company, under Lieutenant Frazer,[5] had succeeded in making a track at a grade of one in three down the face of the escarpment overlooking Barce, by-passing the craters in the road. A troop of the 2/1st Field Regiment fired six rounds bracketing Barce, whereupon, at 12.35, a white flag was seen flying from a large building and a white Very light was fired. A small party from the 2/1st proceeded into the town which, at 3 p.m., was formally surrendered to an officer of the artillery regiment. Later Onslow led some carriers into Barce from the south and inspected the town and particularly a large dump of ammunition. At 4.20, a few minutes after they had left the dump, it exploded with a roar which shook the town and provided the watchers on the escarpment above with a memorable spectacle: a huge opalescent ball of smoke and flame shot up into the air, apparently from the centre of the town, billowed out and rose on a stem of smoke until it resembled a vast toadstool. At dusk a company of the 2/8th entered Barce and found, as usual, that their first task was to drive off bands of Libyans who were looting the houses and dumps. During the night fires of unxeplained origin broke out in several stores along the main street and they were burnt out. That night Robertson gave orders to the 2/4th to move along the route through El Abiar to Benina, beginning at 7 a.m., and to the 2/11th and other troops under his command (except Mitchell's detachment) to follow. All night a cold wind blew and just before dawn it began to rain.

Meanwhile, fifty miles to the south-east Colonel Combe, with a squadron of armoured cars and one of tanks, had left Msus at 7 a.m. on the 5th February and at 10.34 reached Antelat and found it abandoned. There he was joined by the remainder of the flying column including the 2/Rifle Brigade and two batteries of artillery, and thence he sent armoured

[5] Maj L. T. Frazer, VX15205. 2/8 Fd Coy and Engr Tech adviser Comb Ops. Municipal engineer; of Canterbury, Vic; b. Glenferrie, Vic, 2 Apr 1908.

car patrols to Beda Fomm and Sidi Saleh. Both patrols advanced to positions commanding the main road; and at midday the 2/Rifle Brigade and "C" Battery, Royal Horse Artillery, took up a position north-west of Sidi Saleh astride the main road and a track through the sandhills west of it. Half an hour later an enemy column came into view moving south and was dispersed by the guns, the Italians abandoning their vehicles and taking up firing positions between the main road and the sea. Enemy lorries and three medium tanks were put out of action. At 3 p.m. a column of thirty lorries approached Combe's road block; after a short fight the British troops captured it, taking between 200 and 300 prisoners. At 5 o'clock an apparently unending column of vehicles carrying about 5,000 troops and civilians appeared and they too surrendered as they reached the road block.

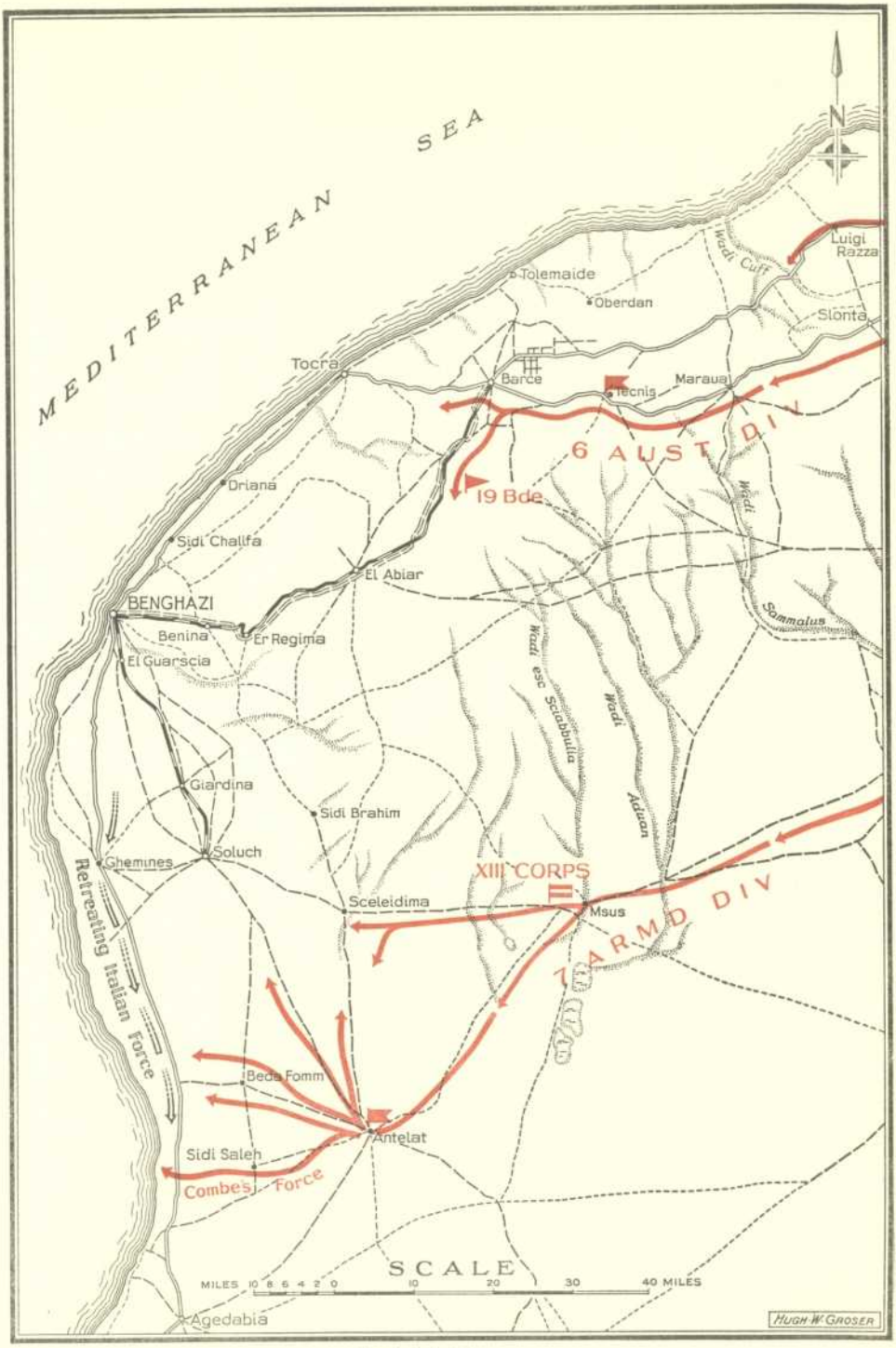
Meanwhile the 4th Armoured Brigade, which had reached Antelat about 4.30 p.m., intercepted a message from Combe's force that a stream of lorries and motor-cycles was moving down the road, and advanced west through Beda Fomm to attack it in the flank on a wide front. The 7th Hussars on the left struck "a soft part of the enemy column" and took, first, 400 prisoners, and, later, with a squadron of the 2nd Royal Tanks, 600 prisoners including men of the *60th (Sabratha) Division*. At dusk the tank regiments withdrew to a position commanding the road from the east.

At 10.30 a.m. that day General Creagh had placed the Support Group under the command of Brigadier Russell[6] of the 7th Armoured Brigade and ordered this combined force to advance through Sceleidima, secure the escarpment there, and patrol thence to Sidi Brahim and Soluch. Thus while Combe blocked the advance of the Italian column and Caunter attacked it in the flank, Russell would cut off its retreat. By 3 p.m. a squadron of the 11th Hussars leading this column had found that a fort on a hill about 100 feet above the valley leading down the escarpment at Sceleidima was strongly held. At 5 p.m. the remainder of the column having arrived, the 1/King's Royal Rifle Corps and a battery of artillery began to engage the enemy. The capture of the fort was a job for infantry and gunners, and consequently at 5.45 p.m. Brigadier Russell handed over to Brigadier Gott of the Support Group and led his brigade towards Antelat to reinforce Brigadier Caunter.

Thus, at nightfall on the 5th, Combe's force was astride the road west of Sidi Saleh, the 4th Armoured Brigade in the Beda Fomm area, the 7th Armoured Brigade on its way to Antelat and the Support Group at Sceleidima. In the pocket between these columns and the sea, a pocket about forty miles deep and, at the bottom, only five miles wide they evidently contained all that was left of the Italian *Tenth Army* and with it a large part of the Italian population of Benghazi.

At dawn on the 6th, in blinding rain, the head of the enemy column attacked the southernmost road block, but a gun supporting the Italians

[6] Brig H. E. Russell; Comd 7 Armd Bde. Regular soldier; b. 12 Aug 1896. Killed in aircraft accident 1941.



Dusk 5th February.

was quickly put out of action by the horse artillery, and white flags were soon flying from many enemy vehicles. At 8.50 a.m. twelve Italian M13 tanks attacked a squadron of the 2nd Royal Tanks which was commanding the road seven miles farther north. The remainder of the regiment moved forward from Beda Fomm to support the forward squadron. More Italian tanks joined the action supported by field guns, and forced the leading squadron of the 2nd to withdraw to a ridge three miles west of the road, where it was again attacked by enemy tanks at 9.30. Another squadron attacked these in flank and the Italian tanks moved south after eight had been put out of action. About ten tanks then engaged the British squadrons. One squadron, now reduced to seven cruiser tanks, attacked these, while another moved south against a column on the main road and knocked out ten tanks. At 11.25 twelve enemy tanks with artillery and a long column of vehicles attacked the regiment. Five British tanks were put out of action and at 1.45 the regiment withdrew to replenish.

By 11 a.m. the 7th Hussars had advanced to a position astride the road north of the 2nd Royal Tanks, with the tail of the column attacking the 2nd Tanks to their south and the head of another column advancing from the north. Twenty tanks from the northern column advanced and the Hussars withdrew to a position on the eastern flank of the enemy column. At 1 o'clock Brigadier Caunter believed that his regiments had engaged 100 enemy medium tanks and disabled forty of them. As a result of mechanical breakdowns his own strength in cruisers had been reduced to nine fit for action. However, the headquarters of the 7th Brigade with the 1st Royal Tanks (with eleven cruisers in action) and a battery of artillery was on its way from Antelat to Beda Fomm. About 1 p.m. the 7th and 3rd Hussars attacked the enemy column slowly moving south towards Combe's force, the 3rd engaging twenty medium tanks at the head of the convoy; after exchanging fire with enemy tanks and guns for about forty-five minutes they withdrew. The Italian column stretched north as far as patrols of the 7th Hussars could see.

Having replenished its ammunition, the 2nd Royal Tanks, now only six cruisers strong, advanced from near Beda Fomm against fifteen to twenty enemy tanks and lorries packed two deep on the road near by. They came under sharp fire from tanks and artillery. Between 2.30 and 3 p.m. the 3rd Hussars (with only four cruisers remaining) and the 7th engaged a large force of enemy tanks, some twenty-six of which were eventually contained by the 3rd Hussars. At this time the 1st Royal Tanks reached Beda Fomm just in time to intercept thirty medium tanks trying to break away to the south-east and, with the help of their attached troop of artillery, knocked out three and drove the remainder north-west. The 1st Royal Tanks, now in touch with the 2nd to the south of it, pursued these tanks, while the 2nd, with "F" Battery, R.H.A., engaged some thirty tanks assembled on a knoll near the road supported by artillery. About 4.30 both these groups of enemy tanks were withdrawing north-west. At length the group from the knoll was caught between the 1st Royal Tanks on the east and the 2nd on the south and six were put out of action.

While this fight was in progress the 3rd and 7th Hussars and "F" Battery were blazing at the densely packed column of lorries and tanks on the road farther north.

At length, at 6 p.m., in failing light the Italian column succeeded in breaking through the 4th Armoured Brigade and, under fire from "F" Battery, moved slowly southwards, the tanks and some lorries on the main road, but most of the soft-skinned vehicles on the coastal track to the west. The three regiments of the 4th Brigade had fought almost to a standstill; the 3rd Hussars had only four cruisers and twenty-four light tanks in action, the 7th Hussars one cruiser and twenty light, the 2nd Royal Tanks ten cruisers and seven light. It had destroyed fifty-one M13 medium tanks for a loss in action of three cruisers and seven men. Other forces had knocked out thirty-three. Ten thousand prisoners had been taken in the day. The enemy force was then, at 6.30 p.m., moving south in two long columns towards Combe's position astride the main road, which was now blocked by abandoned tanks and lorries, six deep and stretching far northwards. By 8 p.m. Combe was being attacked by about thirty tanks. Three were disabled by mines, one by artillery fire. At 8.30 four tanks and thirty lorries evaded the road block and escaped southwards, but by 10 p.m. the attack had died down.

Meanwhile the 1/King's Royal Rifle Corps had attacked the Sceleidima fort at 7.30 a.m. but lost two carriers on a minefield. This delayed the attack, but at 10 a.m. a group of medium tanks withdrew from the fort and made off. Half an hour later the leading troops of the Support Group had entered the fort and found it abandoned. A squadron of the 11th Hussars hastened to Soluch which it entered at 12.30 and found to be clear of the enemy. From Soluch one troop of the 11th Hussars advanced north to Giardina and on towards Benghazi, and another to Ghemines where it took 400 prisoners. By 4 p.m. the main body of the Support Group had reached Soluch. The enemy's position was hopeless. He had fought with some determination but had lost many tanks and was caught in the trap.

General O'Connor's orders for 7th February were that Mackay should send a brigade group to Ghemines, while Creagh moved the Support Group southward along the main road and the coastal track. Next morning at 6.30 a column of lorries headed by thirty medium tanks, the spearhead of a column stretching eleven miles and a half to the north, advanced against the 2/Rifle Brigade at Combe's road block. Two guns of the horse artillery knocked out the leading tank and damaged seven others before they were themselves silenced. Later the artillery and the anti-tank riflemen of the Rifle Brigade disabled a number of vehicles, and soon after 7 o'clock the entire column—5,000 to 6,000 men—surrendered, with the exception of one medium tank which advanced into the centre of the battalion's position, where at 8.30 it was knocked out by a damaged gun of the 106th R.H.A. By 8.55 a.m. resistance had ceased all along the road.

After the fighting had ended the desert looked like a film producer's conception of a battlefield. For ten miles the stony floor was littered with hundreds of Lancia and Fiat trucks, many overturned and splintered by shell fire, and with dozens of dark-green tanks with crews dead inside them. There were lines of abandoned field guns with ammunition boxes scattered round. Rifles, machine-guns, grenades, boxes and tins lay where they had fallen, and everywhere, on the ground or caught in the low dry bushes, were pieces of paper—letters, cards, notepaper and army forms. Northward, along the road by which they had hoped to escaped streamed in trucks some 20,000 prisoners, the last remnant of the Italian *Tenth Army,* leaving behind them on the battlefield 112 medium tanks, many newly-arrived, an uncounted number of light tanks, 216 guns and 1,500 wheeled vehicles. Their commander, General Tellera, had been killed in this battle and the elusive Bergonzoli captured. The campaign was over. In two months, for a cost of 475 killed, 1,225 wounded and 43 missing or prisoners,[7] O'Connor's corps of two divisions, extravagantly described in communiqués as "the Army of the Nile", had advanced 500 miles and taken 130,000 prisoners, 400 tanks and 1,290 guns. It had destroyed ten Italian infantry divisions—the *60th, 61st, 62nd, 63rd, 64th;* the *1st, 2nd* and *4th Blackshirts, 1st* and *2nd Libyan*—and considerable armoured forces.

Probably some 35,000 men of the Italian *XX Corps* succeeded in withdrawing from the Derna-Mechili area to Benghazi where there were about 13,000 troops, mostly of base and anti-aircraft artillery units. Of the 48,000 who thus remained in Cyrenaica about 28,000 withdrew to Tripolitania before the final battle or during it. There were then in Tripolitania the *17th (Pavia), 25th (Bologna), 27th (Brescia)* and *55th (Savona) Infantry Divisions,* and the recently arrived *132nd Ariete Armoured Division.* Three of the infantry divisions lacked their artillery regiments and all four lacked their machine-gun regiments, these having been sent forward to Cyrenaica. A total of 30,000 Italian troops were due to arrive at Tripoli from Italy during February.

During the eventful day of the final battle, the lorries containing the vanguard of the 6th Division had been ploughing their way along a muddy road through El Abiar (where they arrived at 10 a.m. on the 6th) to Er Regima, and Benina, the site of the principle aerodrome in Cyrenaica. At Benina where the column arrived at 5.30 p.m. Robertson's signallers picked up the message from Creagh to Mackay, mentioned above, asking him to press on against the retreating Italians from the north. Robertson immediately warned Louch of the 2/11th Battalion that at dawn the following morning he must move to Ghemines, and soon afterwards Colonel Vasey arrived at Robertson's headquarters and expressed approval of this plan. At this stage Robertson did not know exactly where his 2/8th Battalion was, and appealed to divisional headquarters to divert it towards

[7] The 6th Division's casualties amounted to 239 killed, 784 wounded and 21 prisoners. Somewhat higher figures were compiled by the Army Records Office during the war, but the above totals were arrived at by that office in 1950. Elsewhere unit casualty figures have been taken from unit war diaries if available there; generally these differ slightly from those later compiled by The Army Records Office. If losses at Giarabub (see next chapter) are added the Australian casualties in this campaign were 256 dead, 861 wounded and 21 prisoners.

Benghazi if the division made contact with it. In addition the trucks which had been carrying the greater part of the 2/4th had returned from Benina to ferry other troops forward in accordance with orders from Mackay's headquarters, and consequently that battalion was immobile. Late that night Robertson received news that Mackay himself had met the 2/8th—at Tocra on the coast thirty-five miles north-east of Benghazi—and had ordered it to move south along the coastal road and join Robertson at Ghemines.

The 2/8th, which Robertson had left at the broken road leading down the escarpment to Barce, had made rapid progress. By 3 a.m. on the 6th the last of its trucks had managed to negotiate the road and reached the plain below, and by 10.40 a.m. the column had reached the edge of the second escarpment, and was overlooking Tocra. Here again the road had been cratered and three hours were spent repairing it. At 2.30, however, the Australians entered the town, where the inhabitants welcomed them with a show of cordiality. Thence Colonel Mitchell moved on through Driana to Sidi Chalifa, ten miles from Benghazi and, at dusk, was about the same distance north of the Italian city as Robertson was east of it, though neither yet knew where the other was. At Sidi Chalifa an Arab official from Benghazi appeared and made a speech of welcome to the Australians, and Mitchell's signallers, like Robertson's, heard Creagh's appeal for pressure from the north. Being unable to raise either their brigade or divisional headquarters, they relayed the message to Cairo.

Meanwhile, just before dusk, Robertson had sent Onslow and the brigade Intelligence officer, Lieutenant Knox,[8] into Benghazi with orders to direct the civil and military authorities there to come to him forthwith. They drove into the city with an escort of cavalry carriers the leader flying a white flag but with its machine-guns loaded. The citizens, who included many Greeks and Jews as well as Italians and Arabs (the normal population exceeded 50,000), waved and cheered as this business-like little procession passed along the streets of the city. The newcomers drove to the town hall where the mayor, the bishop, the chief of the police and other dignitaries and officials were awaiting them. Knox handed the mayor a letter from Robertson saying that he intended to enter the city next morning and, until then, was relying on the Italian officials to preserve law and order. With the help of a Greek priest who stepped forward to act as interpreter, and described the Australians as "our brave Allies", Knox learnt that a few soldiers were left in the town and that the police had remained to preserve order—a necessary precaution because Arabs were already looting houses on the outskirts. Onslow and Knox then took the mayor, the bishop and a few other officials back to Benina, where Robertson again informed them that he would make a formal entry in the morning.

Next morning (the 7th) after a delay of more than an hour caused by a report that Italian tanks were on the road south of Benghazi (there was,

[8] Lt-Col W. M. Knox, VX337; 2/8 Bn and Int Corps. Merchant and Manufacturers' Agent; of Malvern, Vic; b. Melbourne, 23 Apr 1912.

in fact, one tank but it had been abandoned), a column commanded by Louch and consisting of his own battalion plus the squadron of the 6th Cavalry, four armoured cars, a battery of field guns and a troop of anti-tanks guns, set off for Ghemines. All Louch knew was that the armoured division was in action to the south, so he moved cautiously until he met a truck-load of wounded Italians with a British doctor in charge who told him that the fighting was not at Ghemines but near Agedabia, sixty miles farther on. Thereupon, Louch, with the ever-active Vasey who had now joined him, increased speed and the column sped along the smooth road that leads southwards into the desert. From British units encountered fifteen miles beyond Ghemines, Vasey learnt that the battle was virtually over.

After having seen that Louch's column was on the move, Robertson drove into Benghazi. Captain Conkey's company of the 2/4th had entered the city half an hour earlier, dismounted from their trucks near the town hall and marched into the small square in front of it. These sunburnt men in their drab khaki greatcoats and steel helmets, taller than Italians and wearing none of the adornments that the people of Benghazi were accustomed to on soldiers, obviously impressed the crowd, which began cheering and clapping so loudly and persistently that Conkey had to wait before shouting his orders. In the assemblage were several thousand men and women—Mohammedans in red tarbushes, Greek and Italian priests in cassocks, neat and prosperous-looking Italian, Greek and Jewish city folk. The small balconies that jutted from the sides of the three-storied buildings on three sides of the square were crowded with men and women who clapped their hands and waved. The atmosphere seemed entirely cordial.

When Robertson arrived in his car there was more cheering. He informed the group of officials through his interpreter that General Mackay would soon arrive to take over the city and that the citizens should carry on in a normal way; Colonel Dougherty, who had been appointed commandant of the town, would cooperate with the commander of the local carabinieri in keeping order. Soon little groups of Australian infantrymen and British gunners were standing at the counters of cafés and bars, eating rolls and butter and cake and drinking coffee or Chianti, and, to the evident surprise of the shopkeepers, were not looting but were paying with Italian bank notes. Few infantrymen had not put some Italian notes into a pocket at Bardia or Tobruk as souvenirs, never thinking that ahead of them lay a fine city in which this paper would buy food and drink and, later, when the shopkeepers opened their doors again, cameras, clothing and trinkets, for Benghazi seemed to lack nothing. At one of the principal hotels the anxious proprietor had piled bottles of wine and plates of cakes and rolls on tables in the hall, evidently to break the first rush of looters. Officers and men, dusty, tired and hungry, crowded in asking for rolls and, best of all, butter which they had not tasted for weeks, and for cups of coffee. It was a day or two before the shopkeepers so far recovered their equilibrium as to begin increasing their prices and withholding their goods. Before long, amiable citizens informed Australian officers that

there were hundreds—some said thousands—of Italian soldiers in Benghazi in hurriedly-assumed civilian clothes; the number of able-bodied young men who were strolling round the streets in groups suggested that this was so. Every citizen who had a motor-car or a truck able to make the journey across the desert to Tripolitania had fled.

No more infantry entered Benghazi that day, but by 10 o'clock two battalions and three companies of the third were moving south towards Ghemines, having by-passed the city. O'Connor, driving north that afternoon from his headquarters near Msus, was astonished to find that almost the whole Australian brigade group was as far south as Ghemines and the advance-guard some fifteen miles beyond it. His plan had worked without a hitch.

It will be recalled that Mr Churchill and the Chiefs of Staff in London had consistently regarded the advance through Libya as basically a defensive operation. Its purpose would have been achieved when "a safe flank for Egypt" had been secured, perhaps at Tobruk, perhaps at Benghazi. Thereafter all operations in the Middle East were to be subordinated to sending forces to the Balkans. In mid-January before Tobruk had been taken the Greeks had declined the offer of a new British contingent and this had led to a decision to continue the advance past Tobruk to Benghazi. (Thus to Metaxas and Papagos, the Greek leaders, belonged some of the credit for the final victory at Beda Fomm!)

On 29th January Metaxas had died. Early in February the new Government of M. Koryzis asked the British Government what help it could give to Greece if a German army attacked. On 12th February Churchill sent a cable to Wavell congratulating him on the conquest of Cyrenaica and adding:

> We should have been content with making a safe flank for Egypt at Tobruk, and we told you that thereafter Greece and/or Turkey must have priority, but that if you could get Benghazi easily and without prejudice to European calls so much the better. We are delighted that you have got this prize three weeks ahead of expectation, but this does not alter, indeed it rather confirms, our previous directive, namely, that your major effort must now be to aid Greece and/or Turkey. This rules out any serious effort against Tripoli, although minor demonstrations thitherwards would be a useful feint. You should therefore make yourself secure in Benghazi and concentrate all available forces in the Delta in preparation for movement to Europe . . . Therefore it would seem that we should try to get in a position to offer the Greeks the transfer to Greece of the fighting portion of the Army which has hitherto defended Egypt, and make every plan for sending and reinforcing it to the limit with men and material.[1]

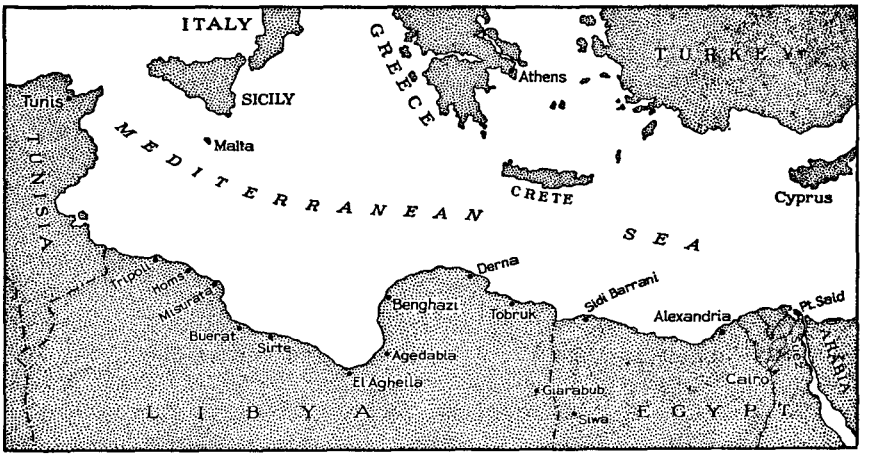
Churchill informed Wavell that Mr Eden and General Dill would arrive in Cairo on 14th or 15th February, survey the situation there, and then go to Athens, again to offer a contingent to the Greeks. "It is hoped that at least four divisions, including one armoured division, and whatever additional air forces the Greek airfields are ready for, together with all available munitions, may be offered in the best possible way and in the

[1] Churchill, Vol III, p. 58.

shortest time." If a satisfactory agreement with the Greeks proved unattainable the envoys must "try to save as much from the wreck as possible."

> We must at all costs keep Crete and take any Greek islands which are of use as air bases. We could also reconsider the advance on Tripoli. But these will only be consolation prizes after the classic race has been lost.[2]

The negotiations which followed and their outcome are described in the next volume of this series. It suffices here to recall that the Greek leaders accepted the British offer. Not until after many campaigns and many set-backs could the advance on Tripoli be reconsidered with reasonable prospect of success.



But General O'Connor, the commander on the spot and the main architect of the victory in Cyrenaica, was convinced that he should have been allowed to press on and exploit success to the full; and he was confident that he could take Tripoli. The troops were not tired; their casualties had been relatively low.[3] Two fresh regiments of the 2nd Armoured Division were due to join him soon, and he considered that he had the equipment needed to complete the capture of Libya, provided he was given full air and naval support. He would (he wrote a few weeks later) have sent the Support Group on to Sirte immediately, made up an armoured force using the two new regiments then on their way forward and the best tanks of the old ones, and begun to advance from Sirte about the 20th.

After Beda Fomm only twelve cruiser tanks and forty light tanks were in action. The 3rd Hussars were re-equipped with all the serviceable light tanks and the 6th Royal Tanks with Italian mediums; there were about sixty new Italian M13's with only a few hundred miles on their speedo-

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[2] Churchill, p. 59.

[3] On 2 Feb 6 Aust Div was 45 officers and 1,621 other ranks, or a little over 10 per cent, under strength. The nine infantry battalions were short of 39 officers and 1,073 men.

meters among those captured. Thus four armoured regiments would have been available for the renewed advance.

General Wilson, who was following the advance, preparing to take over as Military Governor, has recorded that after Beda Fomm he sent a signal to General Wavell "recommending that a light column be sent on to clear the Italians out of North Africa by advancing at least to Sirte and, if opportunity offered, to Tripoli;" but "owing to commitments with other campaigns, especially in regard to air forces, this request could not be acceded to . . ."[4]

We now know that before Benghazi fell the Italian commanders also believed that the British forces would have little difficulty in swiftly overrunning Tripolitania, and that, as late as 12th February, the German and Italian staffs were still debating whether it would be worth while to send German units to Africa "only to be captured by the enemy." O'Connor himself, unfortunately soon, had evidence of the despondency then existing in the enemy's camp. In the report quoted above, written in an Italian prison later in the month, he said: "Having had the opportunity of speaking to several German and Italian officers on passing through Tripoli all asked why we did not go on to Tripoli as they said there was nothing to stop us. Such Italian units as were there were in a state of complete confusion and demoralisation. And no German troops landed until 12th February."

What steps had the Italian and German leaders taken since the fall of Bardia to arrest the threatened debacle and what opposition was a continued British advance likely to have encountered? Throughout January and February Hitler and his staff were anxious lest Italy should collapse. It will be recalled that on 11th January Hitler had directed that the Italian forces in Africa be helped by sending a contingent of German troops equipped to offer effective defence against armoured divisions and by employing the *X Air Corps,* in Sicily, to attack Brittish shipping and bases On 14th January, it was decided that the German force to be transferred to Libya would be a "light motorised division". Later it was decided that this would be the *5th Light Motorised Division,* commanded by a General Funck, and would include a reconnaissance unit (equipped mainly with armoured cars), three anti-tank groups each with twenty-seven to thirty-six guns, thirty tanks, two motorised machine-gun battalions and ancillary units. It was thus to be approximately equal to the support group of a British armoured division.[5] It should be ready to embark from 15th February onwards.

Funck went ahead to Tripoli to reconnoitre and on 26th January (four days after the fall of Tobruk) reported that the proposed force would be insufficient. Three days later the German military attaché in Rome, General von Rintelen, informed the German High Command that, in the

[4] Lord Wilson: *Eight Years Overseas 1939-1947* (1950), p. 62.

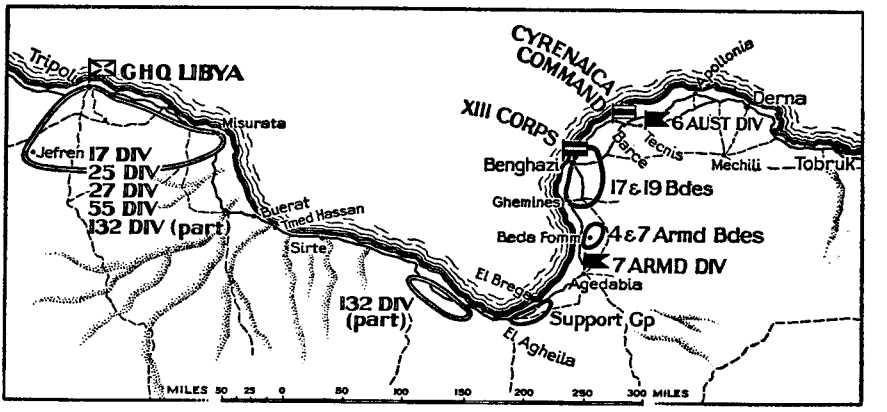
[5] It had some similarity to the contingent offered to the Greeks by the British Chiefs of Staff a few days later.

opinion of General Guzzoni, the Italian Under-Secretary for War, the best the Italian forces then in North Africa could do would be to defend a fortified camp at the city of Tripoli. Almost all the *132nd (Ariete) Armoured Division* had arrived to reinforce the four infantry divisions already in Tripolitania but it had only light 3-ton tanks (and therefore was armoured only in name). Rintelen considered that a mobile force able to take the offensive was needed. (Also on that day it was reported that two German transports and one Italian had been sunk a few days before on the way to Africa.) On 1st February (Derna had now fallen) the German High Command informed Rintelen that it was doubtful whether there was still any sense in sending German defensive forces to Tripoli. If Funck's "defence force" was not adequate and if the Italians wished to be reinforced by a German armoured force, consideration must be given to the fact that it could not be in Tripoli before the end of April. Guzzoni was asked through Rintelen what Graziani's plans were, and whether Tripolitania could be defended if the British army had not broken into it before the Italian *132nd (Ariete) Armoured* and *102nd (Trento) Motorised Divisions* and Funck's force were ready for action. Until the Italians had answered these questions the forward movement of troops of Funck's force was not to proceed, although the shipment of supplies to Naples might continue.

On 3rd February (the day after O'Connor had ordered the pursuit which culminated at Beda Fomm) Guzzoni informed the German staff in Rome that Graziani intended to withdraw from Cyrenaica, but that he considered that Tripolitania could be defended if the British had not arrived before the divisions mentioned above were ready for action. On the same day Hitler ordered that the *X Air Corps* should make heavy attacks on the British forces in Cyrenaica, and the shipment to Naples of Funck's division (to which an armoured regiment and an additional artillery regiment were now to be added) should be resumed. In addition he ordered that preparations were to be made to reinforce it with a full armoured division drawn from the force allotted to the Balkans. General Rommel, who had distinguished himself in command of the *7th Armoured Division* in France in 1940, was to lead all German forces in Africa. Hitler wrote to Mussolini on the 5th expressing disappointment at the Italian failures and saying that the arrival of a strong German armoured formation in Africa was conditional on the Italian army holding on and not retreating to Tripoli which could not be defended.

On 8th February (the day after the Italian surrender at Beda Fomm) the advanced party of the *5th Light Division's* unloading organisation sailed from Italy. It was expected that the division itself could begin to embark between the 15th and 20th February. Meanwhile the transfer of the *Ariete Armoured Division* to Tripoli had been completed about 31st January and the arrival of the *Trento Motorised Division* had begun; the shipment of the *Trento* was to be completed by 20th February.

Spurred by the German decision to reinforce him in Africa, and after receiving the reproving letter from Hitler, Mussolini on 10th February directed that the defence of Tripolitania be carried out as far forward as possible. He replaced the despondent Graziani with General Gariboldi, hitherto commanding the *Fifth Army* which, the *Tenth Army* having been destroyed, now constituted the fighting part of the army in North Africa. On the 11th Rommel arrived in Rome where he announced that the first



Midday 10th February.

line of defence was to be round Sirte, the main line at Misurata. It was agreed that Rommel was to make his advice available to General Gariboldi; and a mobile force, including the *Ariete Division,* would be formed under Rommel's command. Rintelen reported Guzzoni as having said at this conference:

> If it becomes clear in the course of the next few days that Tripolitania cannot be held, I will be the first to admit that it is not worth sending German units to Libya only to be captured by the enemy . . . . However, I am absolutely confident that the crisis will be successfully overcome.

"General Rommel and I," added Rintelen, "agreed with these statements made by General Guzzoni. It remains to be seen whether there is still time enough to carry out the measures decided upon." This was four days after the fall of Benghazi and about the time at which O'Connor planned to take Sirte.

Rommel arrived in Tripoli on the 12th, and on the 16th advised Gariboldi to concentrate at least three-quarters of his forces in the Sirte-Buerat area and conduct a defensive battle until the arrival of considerable German and Italian reinforcements. Already the *17th (Pavia) Division* was being moved to the Sirte area, the *25th (Bologna)* to the Tmed Hassan area and the *Ariete Armoured Division* to Buerat; and a mobile force consisting of the German reconnaissance unit, a German infantry battalion and an Italian motorised unit was being sent farther forward. However, it was not expected that the shipment of the *5th Light Division* and German

Air Force units to Tripolitania would be completed until about 20th March.[6]

On 18th February Hitler decided that Rommel's force should be known as the German *Africa Corps;* but at this stage the transfer to Tripolitania of a full panzer division was still only "envisaged". However, on 26th February an order was given that the *15th Armoured Division* would join the *Africa Corps* when the transport of the *5th Light Division* and air force units had been completed. On the 28th Hitler wrote to Mussolini that he considered that the situation "could be restored. If we could have fifteen days more time in North Africa I am certain that a new British attempt to advance towards Tripoli would fail."

O'Connor had hoped to begin his advance from Sirte about 20th February. It appears that there were then in Tripolitania four Italian infantry divisions very short of field artillery, the *Ariete Armoured Division* with light tanks only, most if not all of the *Trento Motorised Division,* a German armoured car unit and a German infantry battalion. The headquarters of the *5th Light Division* reached Tripoli on 21st Fberuary.

After the war General Wavell wrote:

> As for the advance to Tripoli, Italian opposition could be discounted as small and likely to be easily overcome, and nothing was at that time known of the dispatch of German forces to Africa; but even so our resources were not equal to the task. Our armoured vehicles were worn out by an advance of 500 miles; we had not enough mechanised transport to maintain even a small force for an advance of another 500 miles to Tripoli; and both in the air and on the sea we were still numerically inferior to the Italians alone without any German reinforcement. It would have been an intolerable strain on the Navy to maintain a military and air force at Tripoli when even Benghazi could not be used as a port for lack of A.A. artillery and other resources.[7]

General Dill too, influenced no doubt by the emphasis placed by Wavell's staff on the difficulty of maintaining large forces so far forward into Italian territory, believed that it would not be possible for XIII Corps to continue its advance to Tripoli; in December Wavell's Joint Planning Staff had expressed the opinion that an advance even to Benghazi was not justified. In January, however, they appear to have changed their views "We have convinced ourselves," wrote Major-General de Guingand,[1] then a lieut-colonel on that staff, "that once Tobruk and Benghazi were captured we could, after a pause of a week or two, advance with adequate forces to capture Tripoli."[2]

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[6] In *With Rommel in the Desert* (1950) by H. W. Schmidt, who was Rommel's aide-de-camp, appears an account of an address given by Rommel to his staff "about March 14, I think", in the course of which the German commander pointed out that the *5th Light Division* was still not at full strength, but the enemy's thrust towards Tripolitania had been brought to a standstill. It is implied that this had been achieved partly by the arrival at Agheila of the German armoured car battalion. Schmidt adds (p. 6): "Rommel raised his voice. He shook his fist lightly. 'We *must* save Tripolitania from the attack of the British Army. We *will* hold them.' He paused. 'It comes to this; we must mislead the enemy about our own strength—*or weakness*—until the 5th Light Division has been landed in full strength . . .' " If this occurred on 14th March, the German commander was still anxious about his ability to defend Tripolitania five weeks after the British advance had been discontinued and at a time when the British force in western Cyrenaica had been reduced to two inexperienced brigades.

[7] *Army Quarterly* of Jan 1950, "The British Expedition to Greece, 1941".

[1] Maj-Gen Sir Francis de Guingand, KBE, CB, DSO. DMI Middle East 1942; Ch of Staff Eighth Army 1942-43, 21 Army Gp 1944-45. B. 28 Feb 1900.

[2] F. de Guingand, *Operation Victory* (1947), p. 47.

O'Connor was just receiving two fresh armoured regiments, part of a newly-arrived armoured division; the shortage of vehicles was not substantially more acute at the end than at the beginning of the final stage of the advance, and at Beda Fomm many Italian vehicles (and brand-new tanks) had been captured. The strain on navy and air force was not likely to be as great as that imposed on them by an expedition to the Balkans. As mentioned above, it was the withdrawal of fighter squadrons *after* the decision to go on the defensive that caused the navy to declare the port of Benghazi unusable. The experience of the next few months seems to show that aircraft, in the numbers then possessed by the German air corps in Sicily, could not have made it impossible to maintain a garrison round Tripoli; they were unable to make Malta untenable, and in Greece later a large German air force did not succeed in seriously impeding the movement of the Anzac Corps on the roads or preventing its embarkation.[3] In the light solely of the knowledge possessed by the British leaders at the time there were strong reasons for pressing on: the rapid and utter collapse of the Italian army in Cyrenaica, the existence in Tripolitania of an army of depleted and ill-equipped divisions, the defeat of the Italian air force, the relative inactivity of the Italian navy, the hints already received that Germany might send reinforcements and the need to anticipate them, the fact that the Middle East forces could safely be concentrated against this one objective, the attainment of which would be an achievement of immense military and political importance.

In the light of our present knowledge of the discussions and decisions of the German and Italian leaders it seems likely that if O'Connor had promptly taken Sirte and advanced from there on the 20th with full naval and air support, as he wished to do, Hitler would have ceased reinforcing the Italians and O'Connor would have rapidly occupied Tripolitania and defeated its garrison—a force less strong in fighting units than the one he had defeated at Sidi Barrani and Bardia, and likely to be less resolute. Thus, if O'Connor's judgment was correct, a glittering prize was thrown away: possession of all Libya, air and naval bases opposite the narrow pass in the Mediterranean, the end of all danger of an advance on Egypt from the west supported by German arms, the isolation of French North Africa; perhaps the revival of French resistance. But Churchill's eyes were fixed on the project to form a front in the Balkans and, in the event, his instructions were carried out swiftly, in such a way as to put an end to all possibility of resuming the African advance that winter.

A few days after the fall of Benghazi the force in western Cyrenaica had been reduced to a mere garrison. On 9th February (three days before Rommel arrived in Africa) General Wilson's headquarters arrived at

[3] Two months later, on 14 Apr, the threat offered by the arrival of German reinforcements in Tripoli was so disturbing that Mr Churchill directed that it had become "the prime duty of the Mediterranean Fleet . . . to stop all sea-borne traffic between Italy and Africa", and ordered the recurrent bombardment of Tripoli harbour, and raids on the Tripoli-Agheila road by troops transported in landing craft. At length, on 21 Apr, a squadron including three battleships was risked in a forty-two minutes' bombardment of Tripoli, fortunately without a ship in the attacking squadron being hit.

Barce and as Military Governor he took command of all troops in Cyrenaica. On the 15th General Blamey's I Australian Corps replaced XIII Corps, the staff of which was dispersed—a reckless step for an army which had no other corps staff that had conducted a successful campaign.[4]

On 18th February the 17th Australian Brigade replaced the 7th Armoured Division, which set off for Cairo three days later. On the 13th German aircraft (of the *X Air Corps* in Sicily, equipped with some 350 machines) had begun regularly bombing Benghazi and the surrounding area. The defending air force had been reduced[5] and on the 18th the naval convoy supplying the force through the port of Benghazi was withdrawn because there was inadequate protection against German air attacks, and thenceforward practically all supplies had to be transported overland from Tobruk. On the 24th the 19th Brigade was withdrawn to Gazala to ease the problem of supply and the only infantry left in western Cyrenaica was one brigade.

Meanwhile, towards the end of January, Wavell had initiated a more ambitious program in Italian East Africa. Encouraged by the success of a small mobile force under Brigadier Messervy[6] that had been harassing the Italians in the Kassala area, and by the efforts of Brigadier Sandford[7] and Colonel Wingate,[8] who were conducting a guerilla campaign within Abyssinia, he instructed General Platt in the Sudan, who then had two divisions—the 4th and 5th Indian—to press on towards Asmara. Soon afterwards he agreed to the request of General Cunningham in Kenya that he be allowed to advance on Kismayu early in February instead of waiting until May, after the rains.

In view of the complete defeat of the Italian forces in Cyrenaica (wrote Wavell later), I decided to allow the operations in Italian East Africa to continue for the present at any rate. I issued instructions to General Platt to endeavour to capture Asmara and Massawa and to General Cunningham to continue his operations

[4] Improbable as it may seem a similar action was taken after the final victory in Africa in May 1943, when the staffs of First Army and IX Corps were dispersed in spite of the fact that large-scale operations lay ahead and the British Army was still short of higher staffs that had been tested and welded in action.

[5] By the third week in February only one fighter squadron (No 3 RAAF) was at Benina. One other (No. 73) was at Gazala. It must be assumed that when O'Connor said that he needed full air support to enable him to press on to Tripoli he meant the support at least of the air force hitherto employed over the Western Desert. This included four Hurricane squadrons (Nos 3 RAAF, 73, 208 and 274) and three Blenheim squadrons (Nos 45, 55 and 113). This force would probably have provided an ascendancy over the largest which the *Luftwaffe* could have deployed in Africa in February and March.

[6] Gen Sir Frank Messervy, KCSI, KBE, CB, DSO. Comd Gazelle Force 1940-41, 9 Ind Inf Bde 1941, 4 Ind Div 1942, 1 Armd Div and 7 Armd Div 1942, 43 Ind Armd Div 1942-43, 7 Ind Div 1944, IV Corps 1944-45. Regular soldier; b. 9 Dec 1893.

[7] Brig D. A. Sandford, CBE, DSO. Principal Military and Political Adviser to Emperor Haile Sellasie 1941; Principal Adviser to Ministry of Interior, Ethiopian Govt 1942-44; Pers Adviser to Emperor 1944-45. B. 1882. Brig (then Colonel) Sandford, an old friend of the Emperor Haile Sellasie, had led a small party into the Gojjam province of Abyssinia in August to help organise rebellion in Abyssinia. Later Gen Wavell appointed as staff officer for patriot activities Col (then Maj) Wingate who had demonstrated his talent for irregular warfare in Palestine during and after Wavell's term there in 1937. Towards the end of November Wingate flew into Abyssinia and met Sandford; and on 20 Jan the Emperor crossed the Frontier. Five young Australians, Lt A. H. Brown and Sgts W. R. Howell, R. C. Wood, E. M. Body and J. K. Burke, led a party of 200 Abyssinians into the Gojjam to show the flag in the area in which Sandford was organising rebellion.

[8] Maj-Gen O. C. Wingate, DSO. Comd Long Range Penetration Gps, Burma 1943-44. Regular soldier; b. Naini Tal, U.P., India, 26 Feb 1903. Killed in aircraft accident, 24 Mar 1944.



Italian tanks captured at the battle of Beda Fomm, February 1941.

(Imperial War Museum photo)



The ceremony at the handing over of the city of Benghazi, 7th February 1941.



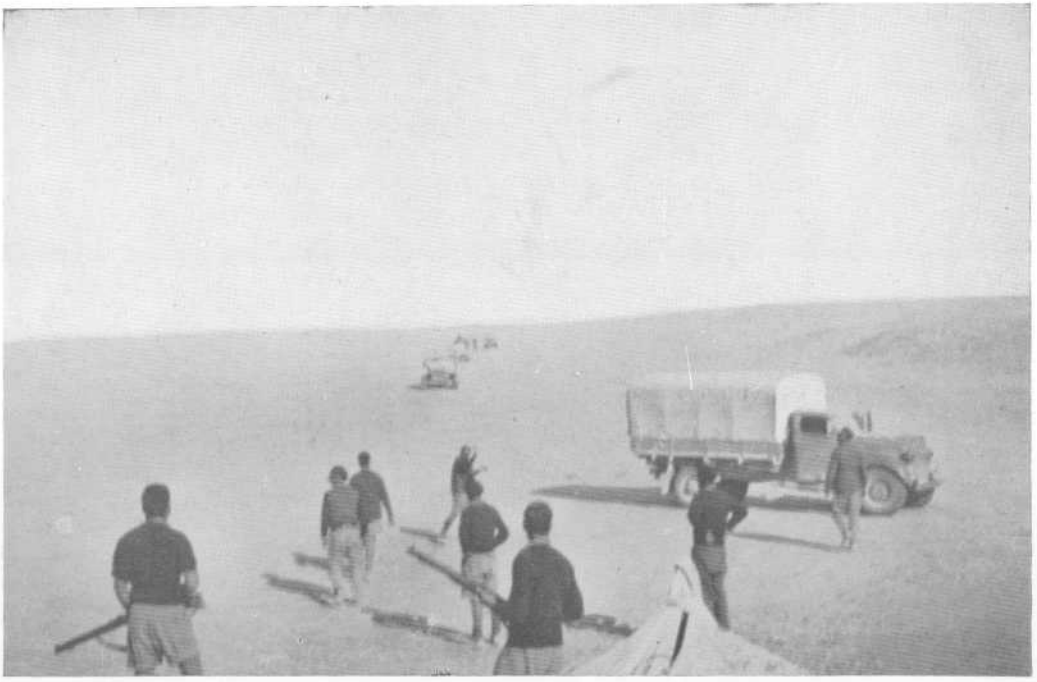
(Australian War Memorial photos)

Brigadier H. C. H. Robertson meeting the local dignitaries. Left to right: The Mayor, the local carabinieri commander, an interpreter, and the Australian commander.



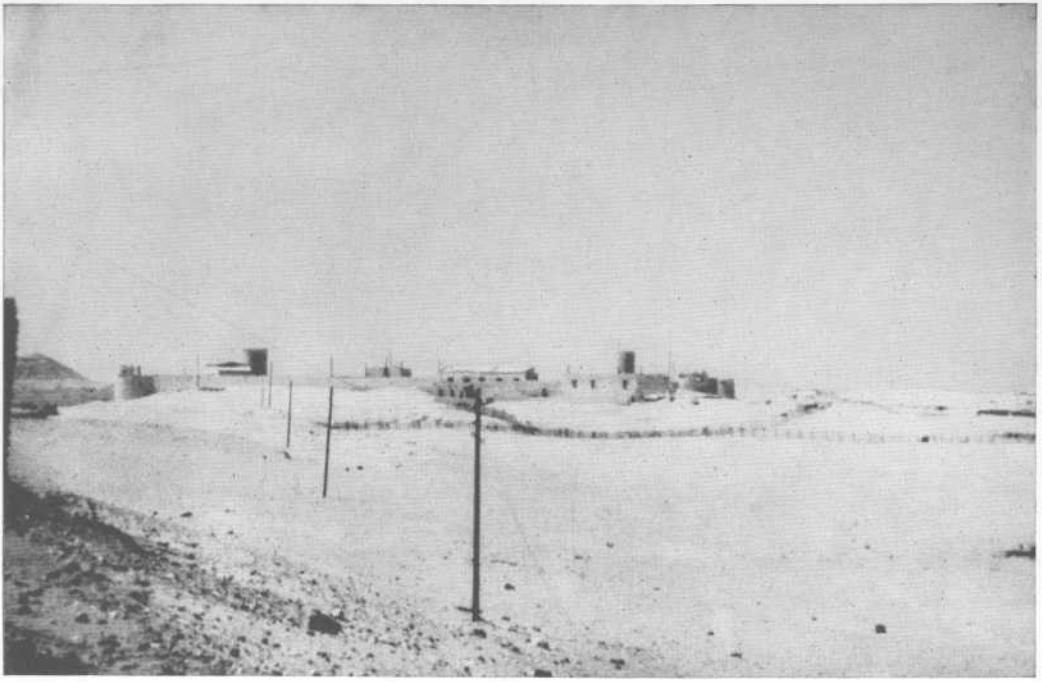
(Taken by Author)

Gateway to Siwa, where the track drops into the depression that stretches from Siwa to Giarabub.



(Taken by Author)

A convoy bringing supplies across the desert from Siwa to troops outside Giarabub.



(Australian War Memorial photo)

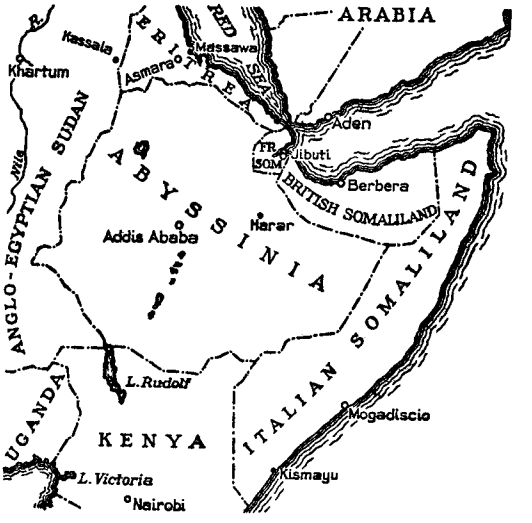
The fort of Giarabub.



Machine-guns and rifles captured at Giarabub, March 1941.

against Kismayu. I told General Platt that he was to continue his operations to the occupation of Eritrea and was not to advance south from Eritrea into Abyssinia and that I should withdraw two or three brigade groups from him as soon as possible after his capture of Eritrea. I told General Cunningham that if he was successful in capturing Kismayu, he should advance on Mogadiscio if possible, but I warned him that I should probably require the withdrawal of the 1st South African Division at an early date.[9]

On 24th February Wavell instructed Cunningham to advance to Harar after the capture of Mogadiscio, and that he wished that Berbera in Somaliland be reoccupied. Convinced that at least two months must elapse between the landing of German troops at Tripoli and their effective use in Cyrenaica, Wavell decided to garrison Cyrenaica with one raw infantry division (the 9th Australian) and a brigade of the newly-arrived 2nd Armoured Division. Thus he would be able to send to Greece the 6th and 7th Australian and New Zealand Divisions and two smaller formations—the 1st Armoured Brigade and the Polish Brigade Group.[10]



While these decisions were being made, the policing of the newly-gained territory and the supply of the garrison was becoming the principal preoccupation of General Wilson's "Cyrenaica Command". After the excitement of the Italian retreat and the entry of the British force, the people of Benghazi settled down into a mood of sullen hostility. Shops were shut and the streets relatively empty, a result partly of the army's decision to fix the exchange value of the lire at 400 to the £1 Egyptian instead of the normal 150. From the 13th February the city was regularly bombed by German and Italian aircraft. In and around Barce were 12,000 European settlers (including some thousands of refugees from Tobruk and Derna) and perhaps twice as many native Libyans whom the Italian settlers feared far more than they feared the Australian troops. Fortunately, although the Arabs had looted the food stores in Barce and imported supplies were very short, there was enough wheat there and at Beda Littoria in the Jebel Achdar to last until May, and a new crop would be harvested in June.

[9] Wavell, *Despatch on Operations in East Africa, November 1940 to July 1941.*
[10] The reasons for this decision are set out in greater detail in the following volume.

Soon after the fall of Benghazi the forward troops were visited by the Australian Prime Minister, Mr Menzies, who was on his way to London, and General Blamey. The journey into the desert gave Menzies a valuable opportunity of speaking to leaders and men in the field and obtaining first-hand impressions of the problems faced in an area where Australians were now playing a leading part.[1]

It will be recalled that since the 18th, when the 7th Armoured Division had begun to move back to Egypt, the force in the forward area had been the 17th Australian Brigade group.[2] From it had been subtracted two of its three battalions and to it had been added the King's Dragoon Guards (a newly-arrived armoured car regiment). It included a battery of the 2/3rd Field Regiment, two batteries of light anti-aircraft artillery, two companies of Free French troops and some ancillary troops, and was directly under the command of I Australian Corps. The other battalions of the brigade remained in the Barce-Benghazi area under the command of the 6th Australian Division. Savige, at the suggestion of Blamey, had advanced the defensive line to Marsa Brega where the front was partly covered by a marsh which was an effective obstacle to tanks.

Every day enemy aircraft (sometimes a single machine and sometimes as many as twenty-five) attacked vehicles and encampments along the road. They flew low and were briskly engaged by the gunners and the infantrymen who, in the first seven days, believed that they shot down seventeen between them. Some units had now equipped themselves with captured anti-aircraft guns. Savige's first problem was to organise his supply line in such a way that it would be reasonably free from air attack. With this object he established a collecting point well forward. To it corps vehicles delivered rations by night and from it unit vehicles collected their loads and carried them forward also in darkness. Before daylight the dumps at the collecting point were camouflaged and all wheel marks removed by a broom-like contraption attached to the rear of a vehicle. In the forward area the troops and vehicles were widely dispersed, and low-flying aircraft were engaged with all available weapons and forced to higher altitudes. The brigade did not suffer any casualties from air attack in its forward defensive areas, though some men on patrol or other duties were hit. Infantry fire shot down two enemy aircraft in the forward areas.

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[1] At Barce Mr Menzies met General Wilson and asked him how the Australians were getting on, expecting to hear them congratulated. "They're troublesome, you know," said Wilson. "I understand the Italians have found them very troublesome," replied Menzies. "It's not that," said Wilson, "they're not disciplined, you know." "These men haven't spent their lives marching round parade grounds," said Menzies. "They come from all walks of life and they've come over here to do a job and get it over." This conversation recalls an incident mentioned in Bean, Vol. VI (*Official History of Australia in the War of 1914-18*). In p. 485 he wrote: "For most British commanders the Australian was the bad boy of the Imperial family; and though Haig rather liked this scapegrace, it was typical of him that when a month later, the Australian troops being at the height of their successes, a party of editors and newspaper proprietors from Australia visited the front, he could find no subject more inspiring for his talk with them than the grave need for extending the death penalty to their national force."

[2] In support was the 3 Armd Bde, of the 2 Armd Div; in addition three units of the 7 Armd Div—3 Hussars, 6 Royal Tanks and 1 RHA—remained in Cyrenaica.

On 20th February a troop of the Dragoon Guards commanded by Lieutenant Williams,[3] exchanged fire with German armoured cars—the first seen in Africa.[4] The pilots of scouting aircraft reported increasing but still small activity on the enemy's side of the Tripolitanian frontier. On 21st February, for example, a pilot reported a column of sixteen vehicles, including three eight-wheeled, and therefore German, armoured cars whose crews wore a bluish uniform different from anything he had seen in Libya before.

Savige was wrongly advised that the armoured cars encountered on the 20th were probably Fiat Ansaldos but next day concluded that he probably faced German armoured vehicles, and he decided that more German troops and armoured vehicles might be landed at small harbours along the coast and advance overland; but at this stage the staffs farther back would not believe that a substantial German-Italian force was assembling on the frontier. In the following days the air force reported up to thirteen ships in Tripoli harbour, including some of about 10,000 tons. Wellington bombers flying from landing grounds in Cyrenaica and Malta were now making regular attacks on ships in Tripoli harbour and later at Sirte. On 24th February I Australian Corps, which was destined for Greece, handed over its responsibilities to the 6th Division and on the 27th General Neame[5] replaced General Wilson as commander in Cyrenaica. (Five days earlier Wilson had been told that he would command the expedition to Greece.) There was then only a shadow force west of Derna. It consisted of Mackay's headquarters with Savige's brigade group and the 3rd Armoured Brigade under command.

On the 23rd the staffs of Cyrenaica Command and I Australian Corps were still expressing the opinion that an attempt to retake Benghazi was unlikely, but that day air attacks on Savige's troops were intensified; and on the 24th scouting aircraft reported that 500 vehicles were moving south from Misurata, which is some 130 miles east of Tripoli. On the same day Savige's force on the frontier received its most telling evidence so far of the aggressiveness of the troops opposing them. Two troops of armoured cars of the King's Dragoon Guards (including Williams' troop), and a troop of Australian anti-tank guns were patrolling near Agheila when they were fired on by a force including tanks. Lieutenant Rowley,[6]

[3] Brig E. T. Williams, CB, CBE, DSO, KDG. GSO1 (Int) Eighth Army 1942-43; BGS (Int) 21 Army Gp 1944-45. Warden of Rhodes House, Oxford, since 1952. University lecturer; b. 20 Nov 1912.

[4] After having described this incident *History of the King's Dragoon Guards 1938-45*, by D. McCorquodale, B. L. B. Hutchings and A. D. Woozley, continues: "Whether this was accepted as accurate information by higher formations is a matter for conjecture, but at the time the Regiment certainly received the impression that its reports were treated with reserve, and that as we were 'new to the job' the imagination of a few troop leaders had magnified an Italian rearguard into something altogether different. However that may be, the report that German ground forces had started to appear created none of the stir which one might have expected—no visits from Staff Officers and Commanders . . . and no suggestions that our hard won territorial gains in North Africa should be protected by anything more than one armoured car regiment armed with Boyes rifles and machine-guns." (The German officer who led this patrol, with his diary recording it, was captured in November.)

[5] Lt-Gen Sir Philip Neame, VC, KBE, CB, DSO. Dep CGS BEF 1940; GOC Palestine, Transjordan and Cyprus 1940-41; GOC-in-C and Mil Gov Cyrenaica 1941. Regular soldier; b. Macknade, Faversham, Eng, 12 Dec 1888.

[6] Lt T. Rowley, VX3375; 2/5 Bn. Clerk; of Melbourne; b. Auckland, NZ, 27 Sep 1919.

commanding the anti-tank troop, and two members of the crew of an armoured car, which was disabled, were captured by the Germans, who had seven tanks, three armoured cars and fourteen motor-cycle combinations. The Germans withdrew with their prisoners, and towing the disabled car. Next day Savige sent out an armoured care squadron with two platoons of infantry, a section of field guns and a section of anti-tank guns, to return the compliment by ambushing the German force should it appear again, but, although this force remained in position for four days, the enemy did not reappear on the ground. However, on the 27th, a strong enemy air force effectively strafed the would-be ambushers, damaging three armoured cars and two trucks and causing nine casualties.

When General Mackay had taken command of the fighting troops in western Cyrenaica on the 24th he had given the 3rd Armoured Brigade the task of protective reconnaissance west of a north-south line midway between Marsa Brega and El Agheila. The marsh mentioned above extended some ten miles south from the road in this area and, in practice, the 17th Brigade continued to occupy the divisional defensive area on the right while the 3rd Armoured Brigade patrolled south and south-west of the marsh. Mackay visited Savige on the 26th and, as a result, agreed to send another battalion forward to him (though two of its companies remained behind, on duty at Beda Fomm and Agedabia). After seeing Savige Mackay was impressed by the likelihood of a counter-attack and, in a note written on 28th February, said that the possibility of the enemy attempting to regain Cyrenaica "cannot be ignored and must be vigilantly guarded against." To this end he ordered vigorous patrolling by mobile columns, the setting of traps and ambushes, the improvement of the map, and (looking ahead as he always did to a time when Australians would take part in a future decisive conflict with the main enemy) concluded "the occasion of our being in contact with the Germans in Libya is to be used to discover and defeat his tactics so that in future we may be thoroughly prepared to deal with them." That day air force pilots reported that the column of 500 vehicles which had been near Misurata on 24th February was now near the frontier. The enemy had a great and growing superiority in the air and for some days had been carrying out effective daylight raids as far east as Tobruk. The British force in western Cyrenaica consisted of one seasoned infantry brigade and one armoured brigade which had had little experience of the desert.

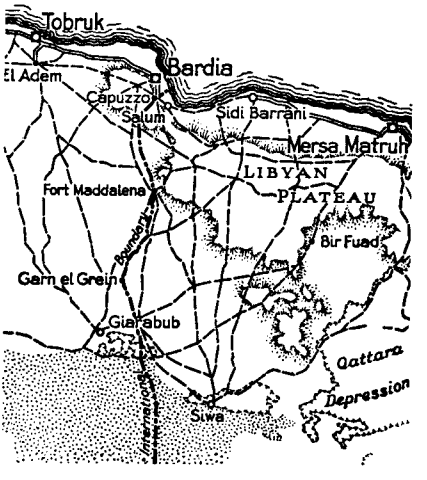
On the 9th Brigadier J. J. Murray, commanding the 20th Brigade of the 9th Australian Division, arrived at Brigadier Savige's headquarters to take over from him. That day General Mackay flew to Cairo to report to General Wavell and discuss the movement of the 6th Australian Division to Greece. Also on 9th March Rommel sent a report to the German High Command suggesting that he should go over to the offensive before the hot weather started.

CHAPTER 12

THE CAPTURE OF GIARABUB

THE advance through Cyrenaica had by-passed the Italian force at the now-lonely oasis of Giarabub, 150 miles south of Bardia and near the southern end of the 12-feet wide wire fence which the Italians had built along the frontier. In that stronghold were isolated some 2,000 Italian and Libyan troops under a Colonel Costiana.

Giarabub is twenty miles beyond the Egyptian frontier at the western end of the westernmost of the chain of oases which lie along the southern edge of the Libyan plateau. Eastwards from the little town extends a marshy depression, lower than sea level, and about thirty miles from west to east. On the north this basin is bounded by the crumbling edge of the plateau which breaks away in a series of escarpments and shelves until it reaches the floor of the depression; to the south and west lie the smooth dunes of the Great Sand Sea. In the depression a few small knolls rise from the marshy bottom; the town itself stands on a shelf of higher ground about 100 feet above sea level. In it is the mosque and tomb of Mahomed Ben Ali el Senussi, a religious reformer whose teaching, in the 'forties of the last century, won over the tribes which inhabited the Cyrenaican desert, united them and brought them peace and relative prosperity. The mosque is reverenced by the followers of the Senussi and it was impressed upon British troops who served round Giarabub that no damage should be done to it.



Facing Giarabub from sixty miles away on the Egyptian side of the frontier is the larger and more populous oasis of Siwa, the ancient home of an oracle so revered that Alexander the Great visited him, after a laborious pilgrimage. It lies between a jumble of bare and grotesque hills to the north and the glistening dunes of the Sand Sea to the south, and forms a wide expanse of brilliantly green plantations of date palms, lucerne and barley, dotted with translucent, blue pools into which sub-artesian water wells up from below. Though it may not rain for years on end the climate is steamy and tropical. In this fertile area lived some 4,000 Berbers who paid for the few goods that were brought from the outside world by exporting dates.

In July 1940 a British force was sent out across the desert to capture Giarabub but, when it was only a day's journey from the objective, heat

and shortage of water caused the column to halt, and at length it withdrew. Later General Wavell decided to place a force at Siwa which could deny that oasis to the Italians and at the same time keep Giarabub under observation. Consequently, in September, a company of the 1/King's Royal Rifle Corps was detached from the 7th Armoured Division and sent to Siwa where it dug and wired defences across the routes from the west; in November it was decided to replace it with a squadron of the 6th Australian Divisional Cavalry, thus enabling the company to rejoin its battalion for the Sidi Barrani battle. The 6th Cavalry was then in training with its division at Amiriya.

Siwa offered water and limited quantities of meat and vegetables, but other military supplies had to be transported across the desert from the coast. Consequently the first task of the Australian force was to establish a store of food and equipment there. Along the track to Siwa there were occasional stretches of hard smooth sand, but mostly the desert was scattered with small boulders or treacherously rutted by the wind. Even in the midst of a military campaign in which tens of thousands of troops were engaged farther north, the tracks to Siwa were generally lonely. Perhaps the men of a convoy would see a herd of camels grazing at one of the rare patches of thorny scrub with a group of Bedouins squatting in a circle near by; perhaps a few slender gazelle would run across the track; probably crows would cruise overhead searching for desert carrion —when Alexander the Great lost his way to Siwa, the divine oracle (he believed) sent out crows to guide him, and though the hall of the oracle is now empty the crows are still there to inform the desert traveller when he is nearing the oasis. Over this route once a week for five weeks during November and early December a convoy of seven trucks travelled from Mersa Matruh to Siwa; on 3rd December Captain Brown's[1] squadron of the Australian regiment arrived. At Amiriya the unit had been partly equipped with machine-gun carriers and some obsolescent tanks, but before the detached squadron set out for Siwa it was given 30-cwt and 15-cwt trucks which could travel faster than carriers and would not wear out so quickly.

On 11th December, two days after the opening of the battle at Sidi Barrani, Brown received orders to move out across the desert and attack Garn el Grein, one of the small enemy frontier posts between Giarabub and the sea. In two hours the Australians, ninety-six strong, were driving north in the moonlight. They travelled all night in bitter cold, and at 7 o'clock passed the low stone columns that mark the frontier. A quarter of an hour later they came in sight of the post—a building of stone and mud with a triple barbed-wire fence, and a semi-circle of guns in position on the eastern side. Libyan troops could be seen. Brown sent one troop to cut the wire fence and the telegraph line to the north of the post; another to cut its way through the fence a mile south, pass through, and attack from the west; and a third to advance to a position 1,000 yards east

[1] Lt-Col F. H. Brown, NX167. 6 Cav Regt, and CO 11 Motor Regt. Auto engineer; of Coogee, NSW; b. Echuca, Vic, 26 Oct 1900.

of the post and fire with Vickers guns. The Italians responded with vigour. After having cut down some of the telegraph posts and made a gap in the wire fence, the northern troop of Australians withdrew on the approach of Italian infantry in trucks. About half an hour later the Vickers gunners, who were being briskly shelled, were attacked by three Italian fighter aircraft which dived on them repeatedly until apparently their ammunition was exhausted,[2] while the cavalrymen fired back with Brens and rifles. At the same time the Italian guns shelled Lieutenant Cory's[3] troop attacking from the west, and Brown's headquarters. After an hour Brown decided that his small force could not effectively continue the attack and withdrew.[4] In the afternoon Lieutenant Ryrie[5] led his troop forward again to investigate, again came under sharp artillery fire, and saw about 100 troops in trucks enter the post. In the evening the little column set off for Siwa.

An intercepted Italian wireless message provided another task for the Australians when, on 16th December, Brown was ordered by Western Desert Force to attack a convoy expected to leave Garn el Grein at 4.30 p.m. that day. During the day the cavalrymen drove 123 miles across the desert and took up a position across the track leading north from Garn el Grein. The convoy appeared at 7.30 and for an hour and a quarter the Australians kept it under fire from Vickers and Brens, the Italians replying with machine-guns and an anti-tank gun. The cavalrymen then withdrew, having destroyed two trucks and caused the Italians to abandon four others, which the Australians added to their own equipment.

The following day Colonel Fergusson with the headquarters of the regiment and Major Abbott's[6] squadron arrived at Siwa. The cavalry regiment of the 6th Division had attracted many young country men who were anxious to enlist in the unit which seemed most closely to resemble the light horse in which the fathers of some of them had served in the previous war. The role they were now being given was one which suited their temperament and training. A group of outstanding leaders, and particularly the commanding officer, had trained the unit well, and inspired it with their own high standards of personal conduct and technical efficiency. Fergusson was a country man, firm and austere, with a varied military experience. He had been invalided from Gallipoli as a young gunner and wounded in France as an artillery subaltern, and between the wars had served in the militia in both artillery and cavalry.

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[2] After the aircraft had gone VX4682 Tpr W. J. Tope (of Foster, Vic) discovered that he had been wounded and, in the next two days, five shell fragments and a bullet were removed from his groin and buttock. Thus, so far as is known, Tope was the first soldier of the Second AIF to be wounded in action against an enemy on the ground, although enemy aircraft had already caused casualties among Australians in camps and rear areas both in England and the Middle East.

[3] Maj G. C. Cory, QX6086; 6 Cav Regt and 2/4 Armd Regt. Grazier; of Warwick district, Qld; b. Gordonbrook Station, via Grafton NSW, 5 Feb 1914.

[4] At Siwa listeners who were able to read the Italian code had heard the Italian commander at Garn el Grein calling at 10.30 a.m. for reinforcements from Giarabub and, at 12.45, had heard Giarabub announce that reinforcements would arrive at 3.30. The text of the second message did not reach Brown, however, until after his forward troop had seen the convoy arrive.

[5] Maj E. J. Ryrie, NX564; 6 Cav Regt and 1st Armd Regt. Solicitor; of Tottenham, NSW; b. Sydney, 1 Mar 1916. Killed in action 10 Jul 1945.

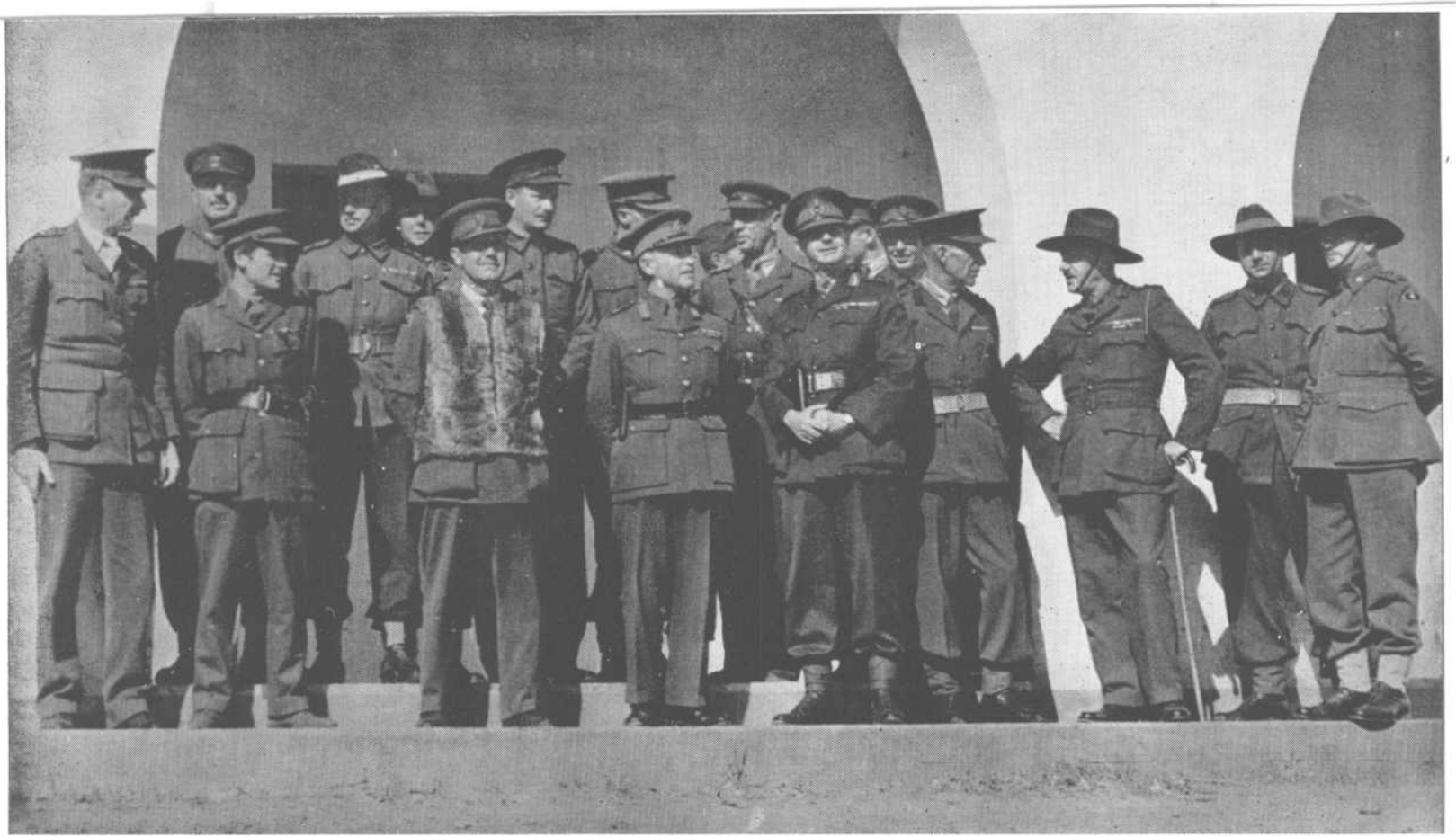
[6] Lt-Col J. E. Abbott, NX176; CO 6 Cav Regt 1942-44. Farmer; of Wingham, NSW; b. Taree, NSW, 4 Jun 1904.

When he and the second squadron arrived the main part of the Italian desert army had been isolated in Bardia. Unwilling to maintain the smaller frontier posts against such raids as the Australians had been subjecting them to, the Italians abandoned Fort Maddalena and Garn el Grein. The first news of these moves came from the Egyptian frontier post opposite Garn, and when Fergusson sent detachments to each post the Italians had gone, leaving useful quantities of equipment and supplies. Thenceforward the Australians' task was to keep only Giarabub under observation and to ensure, if they could, that no supplies reached it. Wavell expected that thus the Italians' supplies would be exhausted and they would have to surrender.

The force allotted to Fergusson to carry out this task was extremely slender. The Italian commander had 2,000 men and a substantial number of guns; he occupied a well-prepared position which could be approached only over bare country offering little cover. At the outset the Australian had 200 men (omitting those who were maintaining the base at Siwa), no guns and no aircraft. One of Fergusson's tasks was to suggest a plan of attack. At intervals he proposed such plans and asked General Wilson (under whose command he now came) for modest reinforcements to enable him to carry them out. On 29th December, for example, satisfied that his knowledge of the Italian strength was accurate, and confident that it was a simple task to capture the fort, Fergusson submitted to General Wilson's headquarters an estimate of the reinforcements he would need to do so—two infantry companies, the armoured squadron of his regiment, and some artillery, engineers and supply troops.

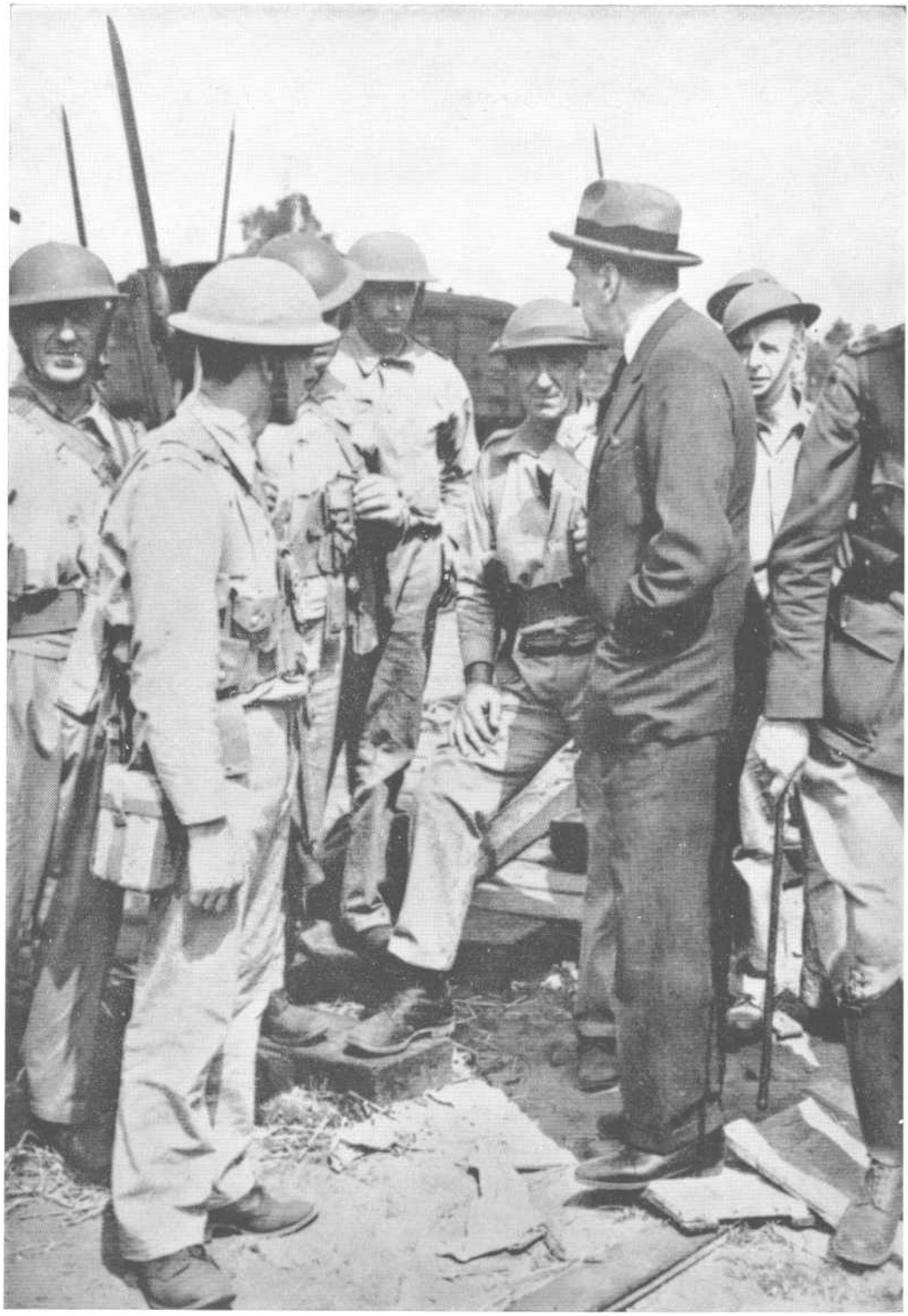
Such reinforcement was not given to him but, bit by bit, the little force grew. First a troop of Bofors guns arrived, then a detachment of engineers, but for the time being no field artillery and no infantry. Fergusson was ordered for the present not to commit his force to an attack. He sought, by driving in the enemy's outposts, to make it possible to confine the enemy to a small area so that his own reconnaissance and raiding parties could be reduced in size and the distances they would have to travel would be shortened; thus he would reduce the strain on his supply line. He considered also that frequent excursions to the edge of the bare and crumbling plateau overlooking Giarabub would cause the enemy to consume ammunition which he might not be able to replace.

For example, a few days after the arrival of the main part of the regiment, Brown's squadron drove a detachment of a dozen or so Libyan troops from an outpost at Melfa eighteen miles east of Giarabub, and next day (Christmas Day) the same squadron moved down the track leading into Giarabub from the north-east along a wadi which the Australians named Pipsqueak Valley—so named because it was commanded by an Italian 44-mm gun which the men nicknamed pipsqueak. They soon came under sharp fire from field artillery and machine-guns. At night an attempt was made to raid the gun positions, but the Italian sentries were vigilant and the raiders withdrew without loss, though later in the



(Australian War Memorial photo)

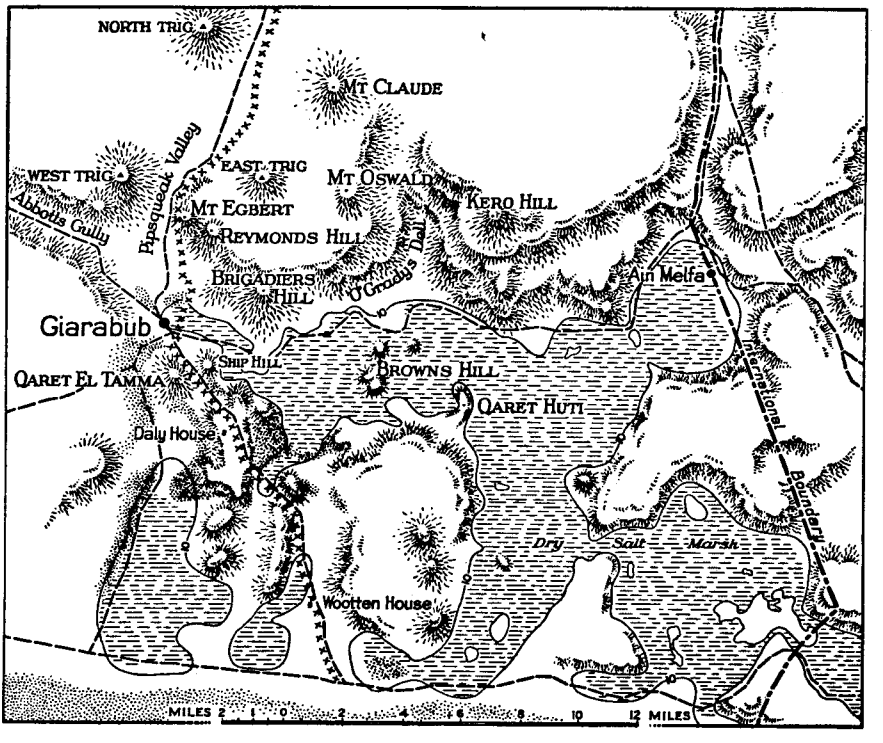
At Barraca, February 1941. Left to right: Col G. A. Vasey; Maj G. H. O'Brien; Brig J. Harding (BGS XIII Corps); Lt-Col L. C. Lucas; Lt-Col N. B. Loveridge; Brig E. F. Herring; Capt R. R. Vial; Maj I. R. Campbell (partly obscured); Lt-Gen R. O'Connor; his ADC; Maj-Gen I. G. Mackay; Brig S. G. Savige; Col H. C. Disher; Brig H. C. H. Robertson; Maj R. K. Anderson; Col C. E. Prior.



(British Ministry of Information photo)

The Australian High Commissioner, Mr S. M. Bruce, with Australian troops in England, August 1940.

night one of the raiders, Sergeant Walsh,[7] missed his way, was wounded and captured. Again, on 26th December, Abbott's squadron, using anti-tank rifles with effect against the sangars, drove an Italian detachment from a well in the south-eastern lobe of the Giarabub depression. This was the last Italian outpost at the eastern end of the oasis and the cavalrymen were able to concentrate on Giarabub itself. Thenceforward raids and reconnaissance became almost daily affairs, each being pressed a little farther than the last. The Italians ceased to emerge beyond their wire defences, while the sight of a single Australian vehicle on the escarpment drew extravagant Italian fire from field and machine-guns.



It was apparent, however, that the plan to starve the Italians out of Giarabub or to exhaust their ammunition was uncertain of success, because large aircraft were landing on the airfield at regular hours and intervals and, presumably, were ferrying supplies. As soon as Fergusson realised this he had asked for a fighter aircraft and had a landing ground prepared at Garn el Grein but no aircraft was given to him. The intention, however, was still to attack sooner or later, and General Wilson ordered the Australians to establish an advanced base at Melfa and there to store rations, petrol and 25-pounder ammunition.

[7] WO K. W. Walsh, NX556; 6 Cav Regt. Commercial traveller; of Ashfield, NSW; b. Sydney, 30 Mar 1907. (Walsh was flown to Rome.)

The Melfa base was established—a laborious process because the local water was considered unfit for drinking and supplies had to be trucked from Siwa. Using Melfa as their depot, but camping well forward of it, the cavalrymen—sometimes both squadrons, sometimes one, sometimes a smaller detachment—continued to scout towards Giarabub almost daily and draw the fire of the Italian artillery; just as regularly one or two aircraft were seen in the distance landing at the Italian airfield and taking off again after a few minutes. A reconnaissance on the last day of December, made with the objects of photographing the fort and advancing close enough to the aerodrome to damage the supply aircraft, led to a brisk engagement in which two men[8] were killed by artillery fire, two, including the photographer (Corporal Riedel[9]), were wounded, and three vehicles disabled.

After this engagement Brown's squadron returned to Siwa to rest and wash, having been out in the desert almost continuously for three weeks. The winter days had generally been clear and not uncomfortably hot and the men had fed comparatively well, often having a meal brought forward to them in hot-boxes from kitchens established at Melfa. The principal discomforts were the intense cold at night, frequent dust-storms, and the strict rationing of water, every pint of which had still to be carried from Siwa; and every few days a raid would be made towards Giarabub under the eyes of Italian artillery observers posted on knolls on the southern edge of the tableland where it began to descend to Giarabub. There were compensations, however: the starlit silent nights, the clean dry air, and the austere beauty of the desert.

Into this remote world the first week of January brought news of two further reinforcements and promise of a break in the monotony. First the Australians learned that a detachment of the Long Range Desert Group[1] had been given the task of patrolling west and north-west of Giarabub, watching the tracks leading to Gialo, the next Italian outpost, 180 miles to the west across soft-sand desert in which only the men of the long range group with their special equipment and training could operate effectively.[2] They were to pass information back by wireless to the Australians who task was now defined as to observe Giarabub, and harass the withdrawal of the Italians (if they chose to withdraw). At the end of January, Wilson's headquarters promised, a force would capture Giarabub. On the 4th January an even more welcome reinforcement arrived: a troop of four 25-pounder guns of a British regular regiment, under Captain

[8] Tpr J. S. C. Fuller (of Manly, NSW) and Cpl E. F. Trounce (of Dubbo, NSW). Tpr E. G. Marchant, SX238 (of Adelaide) carried one mortally wounded man 200 yards under heavy fire and remained with them until a truck was driven forward to pick up both of them.

[9] Lt K. F. Riedel, SX803; 6 Cav Regt. Clerk; of Renmark, SA; b. Morgan, SA, 1 Nov 1911.

[1] The Long Range Desert Group was formed in June 1940 under the command and at the repeated suggestion of Maj (later Brig) R. A. Bagnold, whose hobby since 1926 had been the exploration of the Libyan Desert. Taking up this work where the Light Car Patrols of 1915-18 had left off, he had devised means of travelling over the soft sand desert in motor vehicles and of desert navigation. The story of the long-distance raids made by Bagnold and his colleagues, many of whom were New Zealanders, as far as the oases of Kufra and Murzuk is told in *Long Range Desert Group* by W. B. Kennedy Shaw and *Long Range Desert Group in Libya 1940-41* by R. L. Kay (War History Branch, Wellington, NZ).

[2] The LRDG patrol (New Zealanders under Capt D. G. Steele) arrived on 11 Jan.

O'Grady.[3] The strength of Fergusson's force was now 200 cavalrymen in the mobile force, 109 at his rear base at Siwa and forward base at Melfa and in his signal section and "light aid detachment", 115 artillerymen with the field and Bofors guns, and 32 engineers.

A clearer picture of the Italian garrison had now been pieced together by the Intelligence staffs. It included, they believed, 1,200 Italian troops of whom 840 belonged to six machine-gun companies; there was an uncertain number of guns; there were 755 Libyan troops, who comprised an engineer battalion and part of an infantry battalion. On 20th December Colonel Costiana had put the force on half rations and had estimated that his supply of food for Italian troops would be exhausted by the end of December, for Libyans by 15th January. Since then, however, several aircraft had brought in supplies. Thus the Italian garrison outnumbered Fergusson's force by more than four to one and outnumbered the men he could deploy forward of Melfa by eight to one. Fergusson was able to reflect with some satisfaction that his efforts to convince Costiana that he had a larger force must have succeeded; and he believed that he had convinced the enemy that an attack when it was made would come from the north.

When Brigadier Morshead arrived in Egypt from England in late December with the 18th Australian Brigade, he had been warned by General Blamey that his brigade would be required to capture Giarabub towards the end of January. It was the best trained and best equipped of any Australian brigade outside the 6th Division, of which it had originally formed a part. On 9th January when Morshead arrived at Siwa to reconnoitre, news reached Fergusson from Cairo that an intercepted Italian message indicated that a force from Benghazi was moving to Costiana's assistance. The cavalry set off into the desert scouting on a twenty-mile front, leaving Giarabub besieged by one troop. Aircraft were summoned and they halted and destroyed the convoy. On the 9th and 10th Morshead went forward with the cavalry to examine the lay of the land. On both days the Italian artillery and machine-gun posts fired briskly, and on the 11th three Italian aircraft took part in the daily skirmish. On each of the following five days detachments drove forward and drew artillery fire, on one occasion escorting O'Grady's guns which shelled the aerodrome and destroyed an aircraft. Thenceforward the aerodrome was not used, but the aircraft continued to supply Giarabub by dropping their cargoes on the soft sand behind the fort.

With such raids the little force continued its task. It was encouraged to learn from two Libyan deserters that the Italian garrison was convinced that it was surrounded by a large force with much artillery, and interested to be told that the Italians had four "big" guns and twenty smaller artillery weapons. In the second week in February, after the news of the fall of Benghazi, small groups of deserting Libyan soldiers began to appear, either walking north towards the coast or towards Siwa. These batches of

[3] Maj P. H. V. de C. O'Grady; 8 Fd Regt RA. Regular soldier; of Bagnalstown, Eire; b. Dublin, 23 Aug 1916.

deserters increased in size until, on 15th February, 218 were rounded up and it was concluded that all of Costiana's native troops had abandoned him. Three weeks later an Italian deserter reported that the daily ration was one biscuit and one small tin of meat, but that there was no talk of surrender. Aircraft, generally two a day, were still dropping supplies, he said. The Australians still had no definite news of the arrival of the force from 18th Brigade (which Morshead had handed over to Brigadier Wootten on 1st February, when he himself took command of the 9th Division).

On 7th March Fergusson, with O'Grady and three Australian war correspondents, went forward in his car towards Giarabub along a track[4] through a gully which had been named O'Grady's Dell. Having seen two Italian aircraft manoeuvring low in the depression Fergusson decided to go forward on foot with his companions to discover whether they were dropping supplies, landing supplies or loading troops. No aircraft had landed since the gunners had destroyed one on the aerodrome, and the Australian commander, who had recently visited his third squadron at Benghazi, was anxious to know whether troops were arriving or being withdrawn. He considered that this was a matter of more than local importance because if troops were being withdrawn it might mean that no counter-attack at El Agheila was contemplated; but if Giarabub was being reinforced such an attack was likely. However, the Italian artillery opened fire and Fergusson was seriously wounded. Thus, five days later, when Wootten arrived with orders to assault and capture Giarabub, not Fergusson but Abbott was in command, and Wootten was unable to learn what had been in the previous commander's mind.

Both Wootten's brigade and the 6th Cavalry were to form part of the force to go to Greece, and General Wavell decided to capture Giarabub in order to free them for their new role. Wootten had received his instructions from General Blamey and General O'Connor (who had then left XIII Corps and was commanding "British Troops in Egypt") on 10th and 11th March. The amount of transport available limited his force to one battalion plus one company, with enough supplies to last ten days. The operation must be carried through successfully in that time. O'Connor informed Wootten that no tanks would be available (although the enemy's defences included strong-points protected by wire and there were considerable numbers of field guns, automatic guns and machine-guns), and artillery ammunition and petrol would be limited (another consequence of the shortage of vehicles). When Wootten asked whether there would be air cooperation or support, O'Connor replied: "Please don't ask me for any planes. I have only two Wellington bombers with which to prevent Rommel bringing his reinforcing units and supplies into Tripoli. If I give you one, I will have only one left."[5] Thus Wootten had to complete the

[4] A few days later the Italians mined this track where it passed through a defile and made a detour for their own use. The Australians moved the mines to the detour and thus blew up an Italian truck.

[5] Finally one Lysander was made available and did useful reconnaissance.

task and bring the detachment back to Mersa Matruh by 25th March, though the 6th Cavalry might be left a few days longer if necessary. He planned to spend three days moving to Giarabub, four on the reconnaissance and capture of the position and three returning to Matruh. He regretted that it was not possible for his whole brigade to gain battle experience, particularly as he understood that it would soon go to Greece, but the limitation of the force was unavoidable.

After a reconnaissance Wootten decided that the first necessity was to examine the marshy area south of Giarabub to discover whether an attacking force could cross the depression and attack Giarabub from the south in the area west of the frontier wire, between the depression and the Sand Sea. He preferred this to a thrust from the north where the Italians expected attack and where they held posts arranged in depth up to 5,000 to 6,000 yards north of the town.

It appeared (he wrote afterwards) that the ground vital to the enemy's defence of Giarabub was the (Tamma) heights (approximately 200 feet) situated 400 to 600 yards south of the village. These dominated the whole of the defences. The enemy's main defences lay to the north, north-east and north-west of this and within approximately 1,500 yards. Any advance by us from these directions by day would be under direct observation from the heights mentioned . . . . Any attack from the north, north-east or north-west would have to penetrate the outposts, then deal with the defence in depth and then finally with the southern heights which were themselves a tough object to attack owing to their being wired and fortified and to their steepness and inaccessibility. Such an attack would probably have necessitated a large expenditure of artillery ammunition, a further attack at dawn on the second day to get the high ground and would have resulted in heavy casualties. On the other hand the vital ground was not protected by any depth from the south and its altitude would obviously very largely defilade any attack from the south from fire from the . . . north . . . . There was also another high feature (Ship Hill) south-east, some hundred yards from the vital ground and outside the enemy's wire, which if occupied by us would give good observation to support an attack from the south . . . . Subject therefore to the ground to the south proving suitable . . . and to being able to get the necessary infantry, guns etc. into position . . . the commander decided upon this course.

Consequently, on 16th March, he ordered Abbott to examine the country south of the marshy depression which lay between the cavalrymen's familiar ground north of the oasis and the tracks leading into Giarabub from the south, along which Wootten proposed to attack. That night the detachment from the 18th Brigade reached Bir Fuad, 100 miles north of Siwa.

Brown's squadron drove across the swamp that night using a track which it had found a little to the east of El Hamra (Brown's Hill) and thence, at 5 a.m., moved south-west on an Italian post at a building which it named "Wootten House". It was unoccupied, but at 8.30 a.m. two Italian trucks appeared in the north, evidently containing a party which normally occupied Wootten House by day. The cavalrymen opened fire, killing two Italians and capturing fifteen, including two officers, one of whom described the Italian position and indicated the site of each gun.

Lieutenant Taylor,[6] the Intelligence officer of the cavalry regiment, passed this information on to Wootten's headquarters. From Wootten's the cavalry advanced northwards towards "Daly House" (after Wootten's brigade major,[7] who was with the squadron), a post about 5,000 yards south-east of the town. Here they came under fire from some forty Italians with an anti-tank gun and machine-guns. Lieutenant Wade's[8] troop advanced, drove off the Italians and occupied the area, but were themselves forced out by the fire of two guns which the Italians brought forward on trucks. As the morning continued the Italian artillery fire became hotter and, at 1.50, the cavalrymen withdrew, having accomplished their task: the crossing of the swamp and the examination of the track leading into Giarabub from the south.

The force which had now arrived to carry out the attack included the 2/9th (Queensland) Battalion, a company of the 2/10th, the mortar platoon of the same battalion and some other infantry detachments. In addition to O'Grady's troop of 25-pounders there was a battery of the 4th Royal Horse Artillery, making sixteen guns in all. Wootten's initial instructions to Lieut-Colonel Martin, of the 2/9th, were that he was, with two companies, to make a reconnaissance in strength and secure, first, a line running north-east to south-west astride a track about 1,000 yards forward of Daly House and, secondly, by dawn on 20th March, a parallel line from the centre of the western lobe of the Giarabub depression to Tamma, which would place him about 1,000 yards from the edge of Giarabub town. Martin and Daly reconnoitred the ground on the evening of the 18th.

However, on the 19th, Lieut-Colonel "Jock" Campbell, the commanding officer of the 4th Royal Horse Artillery, told Wootten that he had grave doubts whether the guns could get through the swamp area to the southern track by the present route, which was proving difficult even for trucks. Wootten himself was also perturbed because of his lack of knowledge of the approaches along which he proposed to attack. To test them, therefore, he decided to attack and capture the first line (1,000 yards ahead of Daly House) in daylight and exploit thence to the Tamma knolls. At the same time the cavalrymen were to make a demonstration north of Giarabub all the afternoon and until late at night to distract the attention of the defenders.

In the afternoon of the 19th the leading companies of the 2/9th set out along the same treacherous route in 30-cwt and 3-ton trucks. The disturbing doubt whether it would be possible to pull the guns through the swamp was ended when the energetic battery commander, Major Geoffrey Goschen,[9] and his men hauled two guns across the marsh in the wake of

[6] Maj F. C. Taylor, VX6542; 6 Cav Regt and BM 4 Armd Bde 1943-45. Grazier; of Corowa, NSW; b. Corowa, 15 Apr 1910.

[7] Maj-Gen T. J. Daly, CBE, DSO, SX1436. BM 18 Bde 1940-41; GSO1 5 Div 1942-43; CO 2/10 Bn 1944-45. Regular soldier; of Mount Gambier, SA; b. Ballarat, Vic, 19 Mar 1913.

[8] Maj C. A. Wade, SX2610; 6 Cav Regt and 2/9 Armd Regt. Grazier; of Lucindale, SA; b. Burra, SA, 6 Oct 1909.

[9] Maj G. W. Goschen, DSO, MC. 4 RHA 1940-41. Regular soldier; b. Addington, Surrey, Eng, 9 Jun 1911.

the infantry and put them in position about 1,000 yards south of Daly House. The remaining guns were dragged across with the aid of Italian tractors captured earlier by the cavalry. Vehicles carrying the infantry bogged and soon the column was strung out along several miles. Both in the swamp and from Wootten House onwards the infantry had often to jump from the trucks and push them, but they succeeded in arriving at Daly House by 3 p.m. The Italian gunners began to shell them but not accurately, and there was machine-gun fire, but it fell short. The first objective was found to be unoccupied by the enemy. Time was pressing. At Daly's suggestion Martin decided to send the leading company, Captain Berry's,[1] still in its trucks, straight on past this first objective to Tamma, and there Berry arrived about 5 p.m. The men were still west of a belt of wire—a continuation of the frontier fence—which ran north and south along the east side of the track separating Tamma from Ship Hill. Immediately ahead they could see the cluster of knolls into which were dug the main southern defences of the Italian fortress, and beyond them the white buildings and palm groves of the little town. Berry sent one of his platoons —Lieutenant Lovett's[2]—towards Ship Hill whence it could give covering fire while the remainder of the company moved forward on the left among sandhills which offered some protection from the Italian fire.

As the infantrymen advanced the Italians began firing at them with 20-mm guns, whose tracer shells "bounded all over the desert". Just at dark the leading platoon reached the barbed wire at the south-eastern corner of the Italian defence area. Berry, whose company was now 600 yards ahead of the nearest support, decided to investigate the Italian positions still further, and went on through the wire alone "snooping round" until an Italian sentry challenged him and fired a shot. He then turned back, found Lieutenant Forster's[3] platoon, and sent one section through the wire to fire across the knoll the Italians were occupying, while, with the other two sections, Berry and Forster advanced on to the knoll itself. While Berry was quietly giving these orders the Italians threw some grenades from their sangars, not more than twenty yards away. When the men advanced, however, not a shot was fired—the Italians, probably six or seven of them, had abandoned the post (Post 42) leaving a machine-gun behind them.

All was going well. Berry left Forster's platoon in the post with orders to exploit and explore while he returned to Lovett's platoon which also had moved up to the knoll, and was soon joined by a second company and a machine-gun section. Berry then returned to Martin's headquarters and told him where his men were. It was now 10 p.m.

Meanwhile Forster, "exploring and exploiting", found Post 36, manned by one Italian and armed with a 44-mm gun. They made the Italian a

[1] Lt-Col B. N. Berry, MC, QX6047. 2/9 Bn; CO 19 Bn 1942, 41 Bn 1943 and 8 Bn 1943-45. Civil engineer; of Adelaide and Sydney; b. Unley, SA, 3 Sep 1910.

[2] Lt-Col B. M. Lovett, QX6537; 2/9 Bn and CO 1 Air Liaison Gp 1944. Schoolmaster; of Brisbane; b. Elphinstone, Qld, 25 July 1912.

[3] Capt R. W. Forster, MC, QX1253; 2/9 and 49 Bns. Share farmer; of Warwick, Qld; b. Clifton, Qld, 7 Nov 1914.

prisoner, overturned the gun and sent the Italian back to Martin's headquarters for interrogation, carrying a wounded Australian. Little fire was coming from the Italians because, it was decided, they were bewildered by the Australians' impudent tactics. However, at 2 a.m., after the moon had risen, and while the company commanders were finding a position in the sand hills south of the Italian posts to withdraw to before light, a strong Italian patrol attacked the men on the knoll. In the skirmish three men were wounded and Forster withdrew his platoon through the wire in obedience to Berry's orders not to become involved in "anything serious". When it was over two men were missing.

At dawn on the 20th a fierce wind blew up a layer of moving sand over the depression. All the automatic weapons—the Brens and Thompson guns—in the forward companies were clogged with sand. Berry, on the morning after his first clash with an enemy but as confident as if he were an old campaigner, telephoned Martin that he would have to move farther back and would appreciate support from the artillery (the nearest company was 800 yards away). The artillery fire came down promptly and sounded encouraging, and mortars arrived and began bombing the Italians, whose artillery fire was falling in the area held by the company next behind. Berry went back to Martin's headquarters twice during the day through the blowing sand "along a good covered way parallel to the Italian barbed wire". The men in the sand dunes discovered that in a few hours their signal wire—the only sure guide from battalion headquarters to company or from company to platoon—in places was buried six feet deep in blown sand.

Thus the exploratory attack, whose objective was a line 1,000 yards beyond Daly House, succeeded beyond expectations. Martin's decision to continue the advance and the determination with which Berry and his men carried out the orders had taken the Australians into the fringes of the main Italian defences whence, at their own time, they had withdrawn to ground in which they had some protection against the enemy's fire and could renew the attack when ordered. During the night Lieutenant Burt's[4] squadron of the cavalry had demonstrated from the north to such good effect that, although they withdrew at 11 p.m., the Italians continued firing all night; at dawn Brown's squadron occupied a line through Point 76 on the northern side of the depression, whence it could cover the passage of the swamp by the remainder of the force.

Wootten's orders to Martin for the capture of Giarabub were simple. The 2/9th, increased by machine-gunners of the 2/12th and mortarmen of the 2/10th, would attack at dawn on the 21st from a start-line 400 yards south of the wire round the fortified knolls and would capture these. Thence they would advance to the second objective—the town itself. The engineers would blow gaps in the Italian wire to let the infantry through. The artillery would fire on the fortified knolls for ten minutes after zero and then lift to the second objective. The cavalry's role was to advance

[4] Lt-Col J. F. P. Burt, CBE, WX38. 6 Cav Regt; CO 2/10 Armd Regt 1944, 2/6 Armd Regt 1945. Dairy farmer; of Brunswick Junction, WA; b. Cottesloe, WA, 4 Feb 1911.

from the north-east to the airfield north of the town. To enable the cavalry to be concentrated in this area Wootten's reserve company (of the 2/10th) was to take over the whole of the line on the heights north of the depression. As the attack developed this company would advance along the track Melfa-Giarabub and the high ground to the north to protect engineers who were to develop a track across the narrow neck of the marsh and thus shorten by seven miles the roundabout and boggy route by which troops and supplies were reaching the front line. The capture of Tamma enabled the brigadier and the battalion commander to move their headquarters forward to within a mile and a half of the start-line under the southern and protected side of that feature.

During the day Berry's platoon lay among the sandhills, while, in a mild sandstorm which helped to conceal their movements, trucks carried across the marsh and along the track through Daly House the additional forces that were to take part in the attack next day. Some German aircraft appeared at intervals but did not look for targets in the south, evidently still believing that the thrust was coming from the north and east and not knowing that already the attackers had reached Tamma. During the afternoon and evening Captain Reidy's[5] company of the 2/9th arrived (bringing a hot meal to help Berry's weary men, dressed only in shirts and shorts, through a second cold night on the sandhills) and took up a position on the right ready for the attack. The Australian positions were so close to the Italian redoubt that the Italians in some places were only 100 yards or so distant. For example, during the day Lieutenant Noyes[6] of Reidy's company went cautiously forward to visit a man who was alone among the sandhills as "marker" for a platoon which had not yet arrived. Noyes found that the man had inquisitively moved forward and, as Noyes arrived, he pointed to a figure not far away and said: "Who's that chap over there?" "He's a Dago," said Noyes. "Good ———! I thought he was one of our blokes. I was just going over to have a yarn with him."

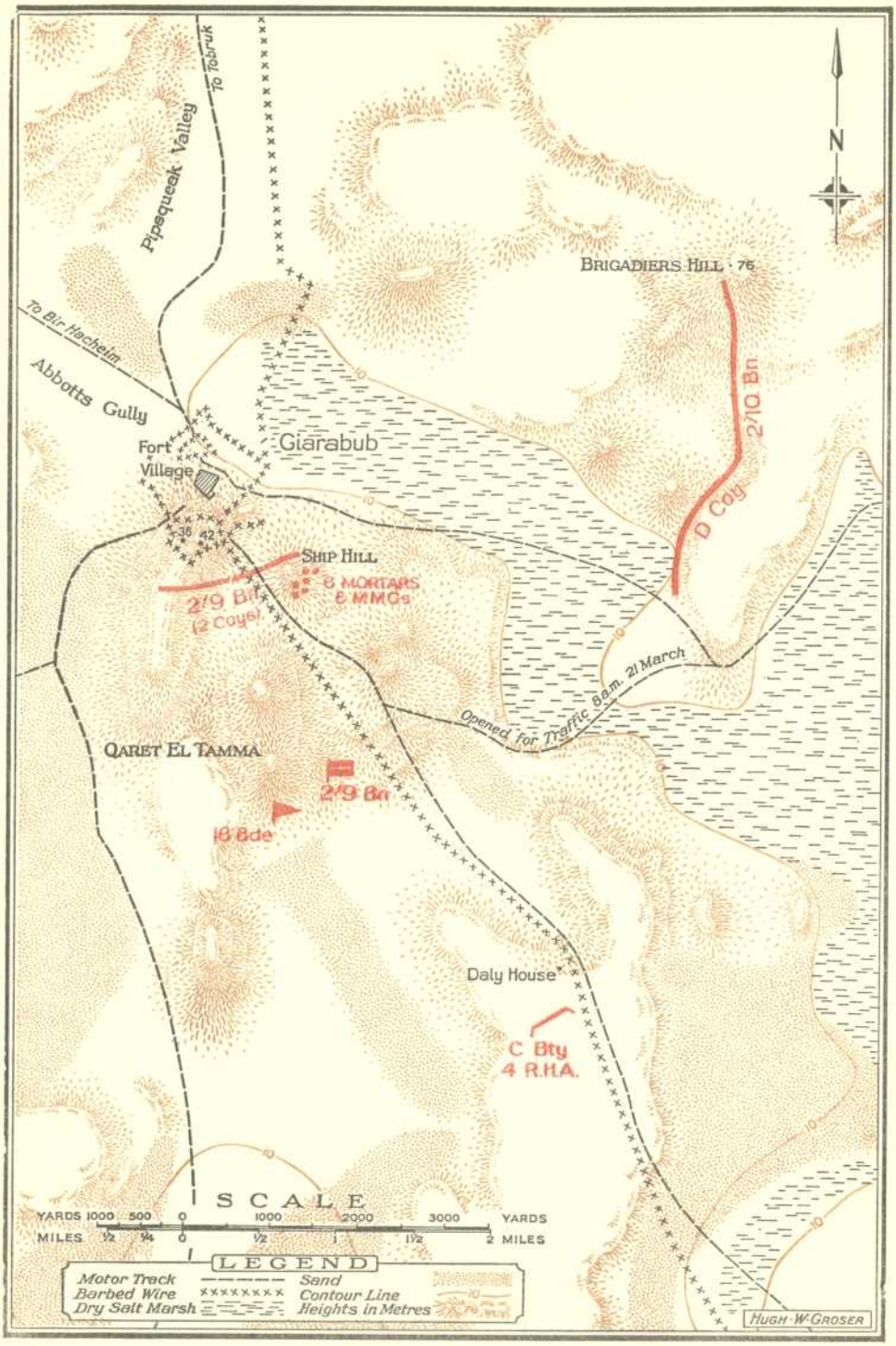
The Italian position which was the objective of the first phase of the attack was, in effect, a fortress about 300 yards wide by 600 yards surrounded by barbed wire. It was sited on a rocky hill about 100 feet high and very steep, into which a system of trenches and numbered machine-gun posts had been dug. Martin's plan was that Reidy's company on the right would attack the eastern half of the fortified area, and Berry's in the centre would attack the western half frontally, while a third company attacked the western flank of the position. In the second phase this company (Captain Loxton's[7]) and a fourth one would take the lead and advance into the town itself. Major Wearne[8] was placed in command of the two forward companies for the first phase. To strengthen the supporting

[5] Capt R. F. Reidy, QX6076; 2/9 Bn. Farmer; of Lagoons, Mackay, Qld; b. Mackay, 3 Apr 1912. Killed in action 21 Mar 1941.

[6] Capt W. H. Noyes, MBE, MC, QX254; 2/9, 49 and 2/11 Bns. Car salesman; of Sydney; b. West Drayton, Middlesex, England, 2 Dec 1908.

[7] Maj F. E. C. Loxton, QX6030; 2/9 Bn. Barrister; of Ascot, Qld; b. Cairns, Qld, 28 Apr 1912. Killed in action 21 Jan 1944.

[8] Brig W. W. Wearne, OBE, QX6043. 2/9 Bn, and BM 24 Bde 1941. Regular soldier; of Brisbane; Brisbane; b. Bundaberg, Qld, 26 Aug 1912.



The 2/9th Battalion attack: position at dawn 21st March.

fire Martin placed on and round Ship Hill six 3-inch mortars and six Vickers guns[9]—Wootten having wisely brought to Giarabub all the 3-inch mortars and belt-fed machine-guns the brigade possessed. He ordered the company commanders to advance in three bounds, the first to be finished twenty-five minutes after zero, which was fixed at 5.15 a.m. Thus the attack would open in faint moonlight and daylight would come at the end of the first phase and after the most dangerous part of the advance.

During the night an ice-cold wind began to blow and by one o'clock in the morning it had raised a denser sandstorm than even the cavalrymen had experienced in their three months in the desert. The wind dropped somewhat in the early hours of the morning, but as dawn approached the dust was still so thick that in the front line it was impossible to see farther than fifty yards. Reidy, anxious to be as close as possible to the Italian positions when the barrage ceased, moved his men forward in the sandstorm until they were within fifty yards of the Italian wire, and they lay there for ten minutes or more waiting for guns. Then the guns opened fire.

> Our artillery landed right among us (said Noyes afterwards). I yelled to them to scratch into the sand which they did. We had no word of 8 platoon or the O.C. who was with it. As soon as the barrage ceased we got up and into it.

In blowing sand the two companies advanced. Very little fire was coming from the Italian positions. Noyes' men found that the Italians were in caves dug into the side of the hill, protected by parapets of stones and sandbags, and generally with blankets curtaining the entrance so that the attackers had to pull them aside before throwing in grenades. Before the first of the two knolls had been passed there were no grenades left—each man had set out with only two—and all weapons were clogged with sand except the anti-tank rifle. The artillery fire was now falling on the farther knoll, so Noyes, having told his men to wait until this fire lifted, tried to find the platoon which should have been on his left, but failed. Finally, without waiting for the barrage to lift, Noyes' platoon advanced. At the foot of the knoll they met the right platoon of Berry's company. This company had had three men wounded in the attack, but had found the Italians apparently too stunned by the bombardment to fight effectively.

The second knoll caused more trouble than the first because the Italians were deeply dug in on the northern side and the attackers came under accurate fire from the fort and the plantation beyond. The Italians in these caves, though they were being subjected to a galling fire from the mortars and machine-guns on Ship Hill, were more determined than those farther forward, and several Australians were killed here by Italian grenades.[1] However, soon after 9, all real resistance had ceased, though the grenading of Italian dugouts and the shooting of every Italian who appeared continued. Berry said that they should encourage the Italians to surrender

[9] The battalions of 18 Bde had not yet conformed with the new organisation under which infantry battalions surrendered their medium machine-guns to special machine-gun battalions.

[1] Including WO2 J. Millard, MBE, QX1256 (of Crows Nest, Qld).

and, as soon as the Italians perceived that prisoners were being taken, dozens appeared from within the honeycombed knoll. About 200 prisoners were taken here; about the same number had been killed. Not until the advancing troops reached this second fortified knoll did they establish touch with the remainder of Reidy's company and learn that, when the barrage fell among the men on the start-line, Reidy himself and eleven others had been killed and about twenty wounded.[2]

Berry, who was carrying on in spite of a wound received in the advance to the first objective, led two of his platoons on to the fort and reached it about the same time as Loxton's company, which had made a wide flanking movement on the left, meeting considerable fire and suffering some fifteen casualties. Martin had delayed the advance of the company which was to be on the right in the second phase because for some time Loxton's had been out of touch and he feared lest they might collide. At 10 a.m., however, it began to advance towards the plantations on the north-eastern edge of the town, slowly because a minefield lay across its path and the mines had to be disarmed. There was no opposition now. The Italian flag was pulled down and the black and blue banner of the 2/9th was hauled up in its place. By 2 p.m. some 600 prisoners had been collected and sent marching south over the sand. Among the captured Italians was Colonel Costiana, who had been slightly wounded by a grenade at his headquarters in the redoubt.[3]

Meanwhile the minor enterprises had gone according to plan. By 8 o'clock the shorter route through the marsh had been opened. The cavalrymen had moved forward from the north-east and, gaining some concealment from the blowing sand and using their machine-guns to strengthen the artillery barrage, had taken a series of machine-gun positions, and at 10.30 (shortly after resistance had ceased in the redoubt in the south) reached and occupied the hangars, where Wootten ordered them to remain because he feared that in the sandstorm they might clash with the infantrymen advancing in the opposite direction. At 9.30 a German aircraft had appeared and had bombed Abbott's headquarters and his vehicles, and the rear echelon of the 18th Brigade, but without causing any casualties.[4]

The attackers lost 17 killed and 77 were wounded, all but 10 of the casualties being in the 2/9th Battalion.[5] It was estimated that 250 Italians were killed, but the exact number will probably not be accurately fixed and was probably fewer than this. After the fighting ceased the wind was

[2] The artillerymen were firing under very difficult conditions. They had found the range when a strong tail wind was blowing and opened fire on the 21st in a still fiercer head wind. Evidently the adjustments made were not sufficient. After the first phase the guns were not used because the sandstorm prevented accurate observation and to conserve ammunition in case (as Wootten then thought possible) artillery support might be needed in the second phase. Goschen had only 200 rounds for each of his 12 guns.

[3] Costiana was remembered by one observer as a small man with a slight wound in the face, standing between two big Australians exclaiming: "No surrender! No surrender!" He had been a determined but unenterprising commander. The Rome radio made much of him and after the affair of 31st December had announced his promotion to the rank of full colonel for having beaten off a "determined attack" and inflicted "heavy casualties".

[4] There was an interesting sequel. Two days later two German airmen walked in to an Australian outpost. One of them said that a bullet, which must have been fired by one of the riflemen who engaged the aircraft, hit a control wire and caused the aircraft to crash. They led a party to the crashed machine, where the injured pilot and observer were lying.

[5] The cavalry lost only 2 killed and 6 wounded in the whole operation from December to March.

still blowing so strongly that the bodies of the dead were quickly covered by sand. Going forward through the redoubt Martin counted sixteen Italian corpses on one slope, but when he returned two hours later, all but two had been completely covered. The prisoners were estimated at 50 officers and 1,250 men of whom about 100 had been wounded. There were 26 guns of 47 to 77-mm calibre and 10 smaller guns. The Rome radio reported that night that Giarabub had fallen after "the last round had been fired." Actually 1,000,000 rounds of small-arms ammunition and 10,000 shells were still unexpended.

The day after the battle, while the cavalrymen and a platoon of Senussi which had been organised at Siwa remained to salvage captured equipment, the troops of the 18th Brigade set off on their return journey.[6] Wootten and his staff arrived at Ikingi on 24th March, and the troops arrived by road and rail on the following four days. On the 30th the cavalry regiment also reached Amiriya, and joined its third squadron which had recently returned from Benghazi.

Because of the failure to pursue and complete the defeat of the opposing army the campaign in Cyrenaica produced a relatively small strategical gain—the destruction of one Italian army and the temporary occupation of some territory. On the other hand it attracted the forces of Italy's more efficient ally into Africa.

On the credit side was the fact that the British force, though small, had gained valuable experience of mobile warfare in a desert which for the next two years was to remain a major battlefield. Leaders, men, equipment, tactics and staff work had been tested in a way which would not have been possible if Western Desert Force had spent the winter watching the three Italian army corps at Sidi Barrani. The campaign had demonstrated that battles are not won entirely with machines but that a small, well-trained and agressive force could defeat a far larger and more strongly-equipped one; and that infantry and artillery could break through defensive lines on which steel and concrete had been lavishly spent.

For the Australian soldiers the experience was of special value because it would seep so quickly through the whole of the growing Australian force assembling in the Middle East. Leaders and staffs had gained in confidence and wisdom. Fears expressed by Australian staff officers in Palestine and Alexandria that the division would be spoiled by easy victories not only underestimated the strenuousness of the campaign and the bitterness of some of the fighting but underrated the leaders. As soon as

[6] Finally Giarabub was garrisoned by a small detachment of the Libyan Force, a regiment of four battalions of Senussi Arabs formed, under an agreement with Sayed Idris, the leader of the sect, from the thousands of refugees who had fled from Italian oppression into Egypt from 1931 onwards and from among Senussi conscripts captured while serving with the Italian Army. But Giarabub was held for little more than a month. On 24th April, after Rommel's counter-attack, a small party of engineers of the 7th Division with one troop of the 6th Australian Cavalry, all in six lorries and commanded by Maj R. G. Pollard of General Lavarack's staff, were sent from Mersa Matruh to remove all civilians from Giarabub to Siwa and destroy the water supply and useful equipment at Giarabub. They removed 133 Senussi to Siwa with their belongings, established two months' supplies at Melfa for the Libyan platoon that had been garrisoning Giarabub, blew up or treated with creosote twelve wells, obstructed the landing ground, and destroyed all the ammunition they could not remove. This included 500,000 rounds of small arms ammunition, and 3,000 grenades.

the operations were over, commanding officers were ordered to resume training "to overcome (as one divisional order said) weaknesses noted during the campaign and recapitulate operations in which the units have not been fully tested, e.g. air action." Mackay was fully aware that in later campaigns attack from the air was likely to be severe. "The German," said a brigade instruction, "will exact heavy payment if some of the gross errors (skylines, etc.) witnessed at Bardia and Tobruk are repeated." Mackay, in an instruction to officers denounced the "ambiguity, inaccuracy, vagueness, irrelevancy and sometimes exaggeration" which he had observed in their messages and reports.[7] There were no signs of self-satisfaction. Then, and later, the end of a campaign was a time for learning its lessons, "smartening up" and retraining. Indeed, the men themselves were so keen and so anxious to acquire knowledge and test it by experiment that it was not likely that, in any event, the success in Libya would have deadened their ambition to master the trade they had newly adopted. Success gave them increased confidence in their officers, in themselves and their training, and from among the younger men were emerging outstanding leaders whom we will meet again in later battles.

[7] Compare C. E. W. Bean, *Official History of Australia in the War of 1914-18*, Vol. VI (1942), p. 1086: "On the other hand a definite weakness in the AIF, though perhaps a minor one, was lack of education in precise and careful use of the English language. This was clearly due not merely, if at all, to default in individuals but to the Australian educational systems, for constant evidence of it is found not only in reports from patrols and outposts, but in staff memoranda and even papers written by medical officers containing the results of scientific observation."

APPENDIX 1

THE A.I.F. IN THE UNITED KINGDOM

To the men of the Australian force which arrived in the United Kingdom in June 1940 and departed the following November and January, the experience was one to be long remembered. Most of them had never seen England or Europe before and would not again, and the fact that for half a year they helped to garrison England against possible invasion gave the adventure a special quality. Politically the presence of Canadian, Australian and New Zealand soldiers in England in that time of danger probably had a greater importance than their numbers justified. Yet so empty was England of trained men, and even of such arms as the Dominion forces brought with them, that they made an appreciable addition to the defending army.

Thirteen British divisions, including three for which no artillery could be provided, had been in France when the German Army attacked on 10th May. They had lost practically all their equipment. In June, after the embarkation from Dunkirk, there remained with the French Army south of the Somme, the recently-arrived 1st Armoured Division, the 51st Highland Division, and several brigades and improvised forces. It was planned to reinforce them with the 1st Canadian and 52nd, which were the only divisions in England ready for action, and the 3rd, which was refitting after Dunkirk but, early in June, was at less than one-third strength. The 52nd and part of the 1st Canadian reached France and, though they and the armoured division were soon withdrawn, they lost much equipment. Consequently, by the end of June, although there were twenty-five divisions in Britain none was fully-armed. The best was the 1st Canadian, the next the 3rd (Major-General B. L. Montgomery). Mr Churchill has written that the armies "were known to be almost unarmed except for rifles. There were in fact hardly five hundred field-guns of any sort and hardly two hundred medium or heavy tanks in the whole country."[1]

In fact, the ability of this army to defend Britain was not tested because the Navy commanded the seas girdling Britain and the Air Force defeated German efforts to gain control of the air. In the air battle the principal role was to be played by Fighter Command which included (in July when the Battle of Britain opened) fifty-nine squadrons—armed chiefly with Hurricanes and Spitfires—of which eight were forming or re-forming and a majority had been heavily engaged in fighting on or over the Continent.[2]

The Australian force which began to disembark at Gourock on the Clyde on 17th June—six days before the Franco-German armistice—from the liners *Queen Mary, Mauretania* and *Empress of Canada* (three other liners carried the New Zealanders in the same convoy) included just short

[1] W. S. Churchill, *The Second World War,* Vol. II (1949), p. 226.
[2] The equivalent of sixteen fighter squadrons had fought in France; most of the remainder had fought over France from English airfields, but Britain, wisely as it turned out, had retained three-quarters of her fighter force at her own airfields.

of 8,000 officers and men. They comprised approximately one-third of the 6th Division and the corps troops raised with it, plus some 450 infantry reinforcements for that division. There were the 18th Infantry Brigade, 2/3rd Field Regiment, 2/1st Anti-Tank Regiment, 2/1st Machine Gun Battalion, 2/3rd Field Company, 2/1st Field Park Company, 2/3rd Field Ambulance—a force which, when equipped, might have been assembled to form a strong brigade group; the convoy also carried a great part of the signals, army service corps and ordnance troops of the 6th Division.[3] On 18th June this hotch-potch force began to reach Salisbury Plain where it established itself in a camp well equipped with bell tents, marquees and huts. Wynter's headquarters were placed at Amesbury Abbey, a stately home among pleasant gardens; the 18th Brigade at Lopcombe Corner; and the remainder of the force near Tidworth. The task was begun of preparing the force to take its part in meeting the invasion that then seemed imminent.

Until two days before the convoy anchored the senior officer had been Brigadier Morshead of the 18th Brigade, but, on the 14th, Brigadier Wynter of General Blamey's staff, who was travelling with the contingent, had been promoted major-general by the distant headquarters in Australia and appointed to command A.I.F. Administrative Headquarters. On the 18th the Military Board informed Wynter that he had been appointed instead to command the Australian force in the United Kingdom. The new commander faced a difficult problem of organisation, complicated by the fact that his infantry and machine-gunners had only rifles and machine-guns, his artillery no guns, and vehicles and technical gear were lacking. One course (and this had been proposed by Morshead during the voyage while he was in command) would have been to form an augmented brigade of four battalions, and to retain the supporting arms and services under the control of the force commander; another, to have formed a brigade group by placing the artillery, machine-gunners and such engineers and other troops as were appropriate under the command of the brigadier, and to have put the surplus troops into a training organisation. Wynter adopted a third course. He took into consideration that it would be long before he received full equipment for his artillery and technical units, yet that his force might be required to fight at short notice, though armed, perhaps, only with machine-guns and rifles. Consequently he decided to form a second infantry brigade, establishing three new battalions by using his infantry reinforcements and reducing the strength of his artillery regiments, his machine-gun battalion and particularly his technical units, which were disproportionately large even for a force based on seven battalions.

By 22nd June his plan for reorganising the force had been outlined and the War Office had agreed. Wynter's headquarters had a mobile and a fixed echelon, the latter concerned with records, pay, etc.—an A.I.F. headquarters in miniature. His field force included two infantry brigades,

[3] The experiences of the 2/3 Aust Gen Hospital which was formed in England at this time is described in Vol. II of the medical series.



(Lt-Col C. R. Cole photo)

A scene at Dumfries, Scotland, in 1943, during the annual axemanship and sawing competition between New Zealand and Australian foresters in the United Kingdom.



(ACME photo)

A march through New York by 600 Australian foresters on their way back from the United Kingdom, September 1943.

two field batteries, two anti-tank batteries, two companies of engineers, a machine-gun battalion and ancillary troops. Wynter considered that the improvised brigade would be "in reasonable shape" within a month. Its battalions consisted principally of officers and men hitherto trained in artillery, army service corps and other units. To the infantry were transferred, for example, 450 men of the army service corps, 276 from the machine-gunners, and 384 from artillery. By thus adding 1,300 technical troops to his 459 infantry reinforcements he was able to give each of the three new battalions a strength of about 600; each had only three instead of four rifle companies.[4]

One of the principal difficulties was to find officers and particularly staff officers. Fortunately Wynter had with him a handful of staff officers of A.I.F. Headquarters and I Australian Corps, and there were at Australia House in London some Australian liaison officers, notably Colonel Bridgeford,[5] an able and widely-experienced soldier who had recently been at the Imperial Defence College; he was appointed to command the new brigade, which was numbered the 25th. The 18th Brigade contributed some officers and men to the new battalions; twenty-one subalterns came from the infantry reinforcements; most of the other officers from artillery and technical units. For example the colonel, the one major and most captains of the then "70th Battalion" were transferred from the anti-tank regiment; five subalterns were contributed by the 18th Brigade, one by the field artillery, one by the engineers.

The four months which the force spent on Salisbury Plain were strenuous and exciting. Both in Wiltshire and on leave, when they went as far afield as Scotland, the Australians were received with warm hospitality. On 4th July the King spent a day inspecting them on parade and in training. (He had been told that the upper age limit was 35, and unsmilingly asked men whom he noticed wearing medal ribbons of the previous war how old they were; they gravely answered: "Thirty-four".) Later in July Lord Birdwood visited the force and sought out men who had served under him in 1915-18. On 13th July the force came under fire, and the A.I.F. suffered what appears to have been its first battle casualty; a German bomber appeared out of low cloud and, as it passed over the lines of the 2/9th and 2/10th Battalions, fired 300 to 400 rounds at the tents and huts.[6]

Within a few days of their arrival on Salisbury Plain a school was established for training infantry leaders—a step specially necessary in view of the transfer of gunners, engineers and others to infantry battalions—and a number of regular British N.C.O's were obtained as instructors. In early

[4] At first the new battalions were numbered 2/28th, 2/29th, 2/30th, but as these numbers had already been allotted to battalions that were to be formed in Australia they were then numbered 70th, 71st, 72nd. Finally, in October, they were renamed 2/31st, 2/32nd, 2/33rd, and considered for territorial purposes as having been raised from Northern Command, Southern Command and Eastern Command respectively.

[5] Lt-Gen Sir William Bridgeford, K.B.E., C.B., M.C., VX38969. (1st AIF: 29 Bn and 8 MG Coy.) Comd 25 Bde 1940; DA&QMG I Corps 1940-42, First Army 1942-43, NG Force 1943-44; GOC 3 Div 1944-46. Regular soldier; of Melbourne; b. Smeaton, Vic, 28 Jul 1894.

[6] One man, Pte A. S. Webb, SX1363 (of Prospect, SA), 2/10 Bn, was wounded.

July sixty-eight officers and N.C.O's of the artillery were attending courses at the artillery school at Lark Hill. Equipment was received at a slow rate that distressed the troops but was inevitable in a country which had denuded even training schools to arm the B.E.F. in France. Early in July Brigadier Morshead (whose men then had only fifty rounds a rifle) visited the ordnance store at Tidworth himself and obtained seventeen Bren guns and twelve anti-tank rifles for each of his battalions. The artillery batteries then possessed between them three guns and three howitzers of outdated models (their proper quota would have been twenty-four of the new 25-pounders). Later in the month the battalions reached their training scale of equipment, which included eighteen light machine-guns (instead of fifty) to a battalion and two carriers (instead of ten). On 26th July part of the force, though still so ill-equipped, was given an important role in the defence of Southern England—the 18th Brigade, with artillery, the machine-gun battalion and other troops attached, became the Southern Command Striking Force, if a mobile striking force was needed, or alternatively the reserve to V Corps.

If used as Southern Command Striking Force (wrote the diarist of 18th Brigade) it is anticipated that one complete field battery (25-pounders) will be added, also two or three of the Mobile Striking Columns raised in the Salisbury Plain area. In this event HQ Australf rce will go into the field and assume command.

Wynter regarded the 25th Brigade as suited only for a local protective role in the Salisbury Plain area.

In August the *Luftwaffe* began large-scale bombing attacks on targets widely spread throughout Britain, including the military encampments. By 15th August the Australian area had been bombed, though without much effect, on three consecutive days, and one diarist decided that "attacks of this nature are going to be an almost daily occurrence". However, the transfer of the force to the Middle East, where (as General Blamey was emphasising) its units were urgently needed to complete the force of which they were part, was already under discussion and, on the 23rd, General Wynter ordered the reconstruction of the anti-tank regiment and the return of enough gunners to the field artillery regiment to bring it to full strength. And welcome news was received from Army Headquarters in Melbourne that the 25th Brigade was to be considered no longer an improvised formation but a permanent part of the A.I.F.

In the midst of these discussions the Prime Minister, Mr Churchill, (on 4th September) visited the Australians, greatly to their satisfaction, and gave them one of his rousing addresses, eloquent but earthy, stirring yet humorous.

You have come a long way to see us in this island (he said to one battalion) and at one time we thought we could have had a party for you. Perhaps we shall still have one. But things are very much more solid than they were when you first came. If that man you all know comes now he will have to come with a lot and that makes it all the easier for the Navy and the Air Force to look after him on the way. And anything that slips through we shall look to you to deal with. It has been very gratifying and refreshing to have Australians, New Zealanders and Canadians with

us in this island during what has been undoubtedly one of the most anxious periods in our long history. The days of the Spanish Armada, or those days when Napoleon was at Boulogne with his Grand Army, were not so dangerous as those we have lived through and from which we are emerging stronger than ever . . . . Speaking to you in the name of the British Parliament and the people I express to you our deep gratitude not only because we know you would fight to the death—for after all no one wants to live for ever—but because of the encouragement it gives us here, now that we are all alone. We feel that though we are alone, as far as Europe is concerned, yet the sons of the motherland, freely and of their own will, come across wide ocean spaces, wherever the Navy can carry them, to stand by our side, giving us their aid, giving their lives, giving us the moral sense of the conviction which they feel in their hearts, that, having made every effort to avoid this war, we are bound to fight it at all costs until this time, at any rate, we have made an end of it. I used to see the Anzacs in the last war, and I am certain that this new expeditionary force from Australia will revive and equal—it cannot excel—the glories of the famous Anzac Corps. We do not know where the course of the war will carry us. It may be that the crisis will be reached in other lands, it may be that the struggle will be here. Wherever it is, we are certain that the divisions sent from Australia will preserve the same glorious reputation which made them renowned twenty-five years ago and which caused the Australian Corps to be recognised by friend and foe alike as unsurpassed in all the valorous manhood of Europe. It gives me pleasure to see you here, because when this war is won, and I have no doubt it will be, there will be new ties and new understandings between Australia and the mother country . . . . We will be determined to lead our lives together and to march along our common path of destiny, certain that we carry with us the high hopes of civilisation and mankind.

By this time preparations for the opening of the long-awaited German invasion were evident; on Saturday 7th September the bombing of London proper opened and it appeared that seaborne attack was near. The code word "Cromwell", meaning "invasion imminent", went out to the Southern and Eastern Commands, and units of the Australian mobile forces were placed on one hour's notice to move. On the 17th, Mr Churchill told the anxious Commons at a Secret Session that 1,700 self-propelled barges and 200 ships could be seen on the other side of the Channel.

However, though the British leaders did not then know it, the crisis had already passed. On the 15th the *Luftwaffe* had made its strongest daylight attacks and had lost fifty-six aircraft (at the time the Royal Air Force believed that 185 had been brought down), and thereafter its attacks waned. On the 17th, the day of Churchill's speech to the Secret Session, Hitler had ordered that the invasion be postponed indefinitely and, in a few days, the assembled shipping began to move away.

If the invasion had been attempted in September the enemy would have encountered a far stronger army than the disorganised, ill-armed force of June. The equipment of the twenty-seven divisions and numerous independent brigades then in England, though still defective, had been greatly increased. There were two armoured divisions and about 1,000 tanks; more than half the infantry divisions had their full scale of field artillery or near it.

During the crisis of September the role of the 18th Brigade was to prepare to deal with parachute troops landing on Salisbury Plain. It was

not until 23rd September that the Australian force, in common with the remainder of the army in Britain, was ordered to stand down. Meanwhile its proposed departure from England began to appear more remote, and on 16th October it was transferred to Colchester in the Eastern Command, where the 18th Brigade was allotted the defence of that garrison town, and the 25th, now better trained and equipped, was made mobile reserve to XI Corps, with the task of counter-attacking an invader landing at Harwich, Frinton, Clacton or Mersea.[7]

On 29th September General Wynter was informed by Army Headquarters in Melbourne that it had been decided to form a 9th Division using the force in the United Kingdom as a nucleus, and on the 23rd October he was appointed to command it.

At last on 15th November the 18th Brigade embarked, again at Glasgow, leaving the 25th, now commanded by Brigadier Wardell,[8] at Colchester. The 18th reached Alexandria on the 31st December; the 25th embarked on 3rd January and reached its camp in Palestine on 10th March.

Also in January a separate body of Australians which had been in England during the last half of 1940 sailed for the Middle East. This was the Railway Construction and Maintenance Group, under Lieut-Colonel Fraser.[9] It consisted of a company and a half with a group headquarters which had arrived at Liverpool on 17th July and at length went into camp in Woolmer Forest, near Longmore, where it built a number of large storage sidings and carried out other work.

The departure of the force which had arrived in the United Kingdom as "the third convoy", had become "Australforce", and departed as the nucleus 9th Division, did not entail the removal from England of all Australian soldiers. In addition to a small A.I.F. administrative section which was attached to the liaison staff under Brigadier Wardell in London, there remained two forestry companies, which had arrived in England in July soon after the third convoy.

It will be recalled that the British Government had asked Australia for forestry companies in 1939. The origin of this request was a decision to send up to thirty such companies to France to cut timber for the British Expeditionary Force. Britain could not provide as many experienced foresters as were needed and therefore it was agreed that Canada would contribute twenty companies (each about 200 strong), and Britain, Australia and New Zealand each three—an allotment based on the extent of the forestry industry in each country. The Dominion companies arrived too late to go to France, but the German conquest of Western Europe,

[7] The King again inspected the Australian force at Colchester on 30 Oct.

[8] Brig A. W. Wardell, MC, NX371. (1st AIF: Capt 10 MG Coy.) Comd 25 Bde 1940, AIF UK 1940-41; Service adviser Aust Rep Imp War Cabinet UK 1942-43. Regular soldier; of Melbourne; b. St Kilda, Vic, 10 May 1895. (When Gen Wynter departed for Egypt, Brig Wardell took command of the AIF in the United Kingdom.)

[9] Lt-Col K. A. Fraser, OBE, NX12168. (1st AIF: Lt 4 Div Engrs.) CO Rlwy Constr & Maint Group. Civil engineer; of Sydney; b. Sydney, 9 Jan 1893.

and the increasing threat to British shipping made them no less necessary in Britain. War is an avid consumer of timber as well as of steel and explosives, and timber is a bulky cargo. As in the war of 1914-18 it was essential for Britain to take what timber she could from her own forests to save shipping space. Only with difficulty had she been able to raise her three companies of foresters. There would be work in Britain for all the Dominion companies and more.[1]

The Australian companies were raised as engineer units and officered by members of Commonwealth and State forest services and the sawmilling industry. The French Government had stipulated that a condition of the employment of forestry companies in their forests was that they be commanded by qualified forestry officers, so that wasteful cutting and unnecessary damage which was caused to their forests by Allied forestry companies in the war of 1914-18 would not be repeated.

On arrival the first two companies went into camp in the south of England for military training and, in September 1940, only five months after they had been raised in Australia, were cutting timber in Northumberland. There they soon found themselves working in snow and mud during an exceptionally cold winter. It was a severe test for Australians, many of whom had not seen snow before, and there was much illness, especially among the older men. It surprised them to discover that in England it was the custom—and they had to follow it—to cut a tree almost flush with the ground and not two or three feet from it as they were accustomed to do. (Similarly, the French authorities had asked that when British and Dominion foresters went to France they should discard their wide-toothed circular saws which cut a wasteful ⅜-inch kerf through and along log and plank and use bandsaws, but this was impracticable.) In 1941 a third company arrived from Australia and, in July of that year, the three were formed into a group under Lieut-Colonel Cole.[2]

In three years the Australian companies produced 30,000,000 super feet of sawn timber. The men were highly-skilled forest workers and, so that their abilities would not be wasted, Honduras forest workers and Italian prisoners worked under them doing unskilled work. At the same time the companies had been maintained as fighting units, had spent one day a week and a fortnight every six months in military training, and had a role in the defence of Britain. (In the critical period of 1940 it had been the defence of a long stretch of the coast of Northumberland.) With the New Zealanders the Australians maintained a friendly rivalry in periodical axemanship and sawing competitions; and Australia, in 1943 at Dumfries, won "the championship of Britain" which New Zealand had held for two years. The extent to which both groups became absorbed by their temporary home may perhaps be gauged by the fact that the 600 Australians acquired about 120 British brides, the 600 New Zealanders a similar number.

[1] Canada eventually maintained 30 companies in Britain, out of a total of 39.

[2] Lt-Col C. R. Cole, OBE, VX11406. (1st AIF: Pte 32 Bn.) Comd 1 Forestry Coy 1940; Comd Aust Forestry Gp UK 1941-43, 2/1 CRE (Forestry) 1944. Forestry officer; of Canberra; b. Mintaro, SA, 27 Jan 1894.

APPENDIX 2

THE 6TH DIVISION'S OPERATION ORDER FOR THE CAPTURE OF BARDIA

SECRET
Copy No. 21
1 Jan, 41.

6 AUST DIV OO No. 6

Ref Maps: BARDIA North and South 1/50,000.
CIRENAICA 1/100,000 Sheets 29, 30 and 40.
CIRENAICA 1/1,000,000.

INFORMATION

1. Enemy as per 6 Aust Div Int Summaries.
2. (a) Own Tps. Supporting action of Royal Navy, RAF, WDF, and 7 Armd Div is given in 6 Aust Div Op Instn No. 3, dated 31 Dec, 40.
(b) Moves to assembly areas and groupings of units 6 Aust Div are given in 6 Aust Div Op Instn No. 4, dated 1 Jan, 41.

INTENTION

3. 6 Aust Div will attack and capture the Central and Southern sectors of the BARDIA defences on 3 Jan.

METHOD

The attack will be carried out in two Phases.

PHASE I

4. 16 Aust Inf Bde, with one Coy 1 NF and A Sqn 6 Aust Cav under comd, and 7 R Tanks will carry out the attacks in this Phase.
5. Objectives: 16 Aust Inf Bde and A Sqn 6 Aust Cav are shown on TRACE A.
7 R Tanks are shown on TRACE B.
6. Arty: Arty plan is shown on TRACE C.
7. Engrs: Engr tasks are shown on TRACE D.
8. 2/1 Bn will cross the SL at 0530 hrs and will form a tank bridgehead by capturing the objectives shown on TRACE A and on arrival 4 Tp 7 R Tanks will capture their final objective.
9. 2/1 Fd Coy will follow 2/1 Bn and will build tank crossings as shown on TRACE D.
10. (a) 7 R Tanks will pass the inf SL at 0640 hrs, cross A Tk ditch at 0650 hrs, and send 4 Tp to assist 2/1 Bn in capturing their final objective. On completion of task, 4 Tp will come into res under comd 7 R Tanks.
(b) 7 R Tanks less 4 Tp, after crossing ditch, will attack with three Tps fwd as shown on TRACE B. Each fwd Tp will be followed by a Coy of 2/2 Bn.
(c) After capture of objective, 7 R Tanks will rally in area of Post No. 40.
11. 2/2 Bn will pass SL at 0629 hrs and as 7 R Tanks cross the ditch fwd Coys will take up their posns and follow their respective Tp of tanks. 2/2 Bn will assist tanks in mopping up and will capture objective shown on TRACE A.
12. 2/2 Fd Coy will follow 2/2 Bn into the perimeter and will move down the perimeter to carry out the tasks shown on TRACE D.
13. 2/3 Bn will pass SL at 0734 hrs and capture objective shown on TRACE A.
14. A Sqn 6 Aust Cav will follow 2/3 Bn and capture objective shown on TRACE A.
15. One Coy 2/7 Bn will move into the perimeter and occupy the sector shown on TRACE A after 7 R Tanks and 2/2 Bn have captured their objective.

16. 2/5 Bn will cross the perimeter by 0800 hrs and occupy a fwd assembly area as shown on TRACE A.

17. RESERVE: Until zero for Phase II, 2/5 Bn will be at call of Comd 16 Aust Inf Bde for a purely defensive role in the event of serious enemy penetration of his front.

18. Arty: Plan shown on TRACE C.

(a) Summary of Programme.

Time hrs	Target	No. of guns	Rate rpgpm	Remarks
0530-0555	Posts 45-47 in 43 1st 49 Line	52-25prs 12-25prs 4-4.5 guns	3 3 2	Incl 8-6 in Hows to 0545 hrs.
	Posts 42 in 44 2nd 46 Line	12-25prs 4-4.5 guns 4-60prs	3 2 2	At 0545 hrs 8-6 in Hows lift on to these Posts.
0555-0620	Posts 42, 44, 46 & Posts to N E & S	36-25prs Remainder arty.	3 to 2 3 to 2 2 to 1	Fd arty. Med arty.
0620-0655	Box around tank bridgehead	All arty.	1 to 2 1 to 1½	Fd arty. Med arty.
0655-0730	Arty concentration moves South on each Post in turn to Posts 25, 24, 26.	12 guns on each Post for 10 mins.		Arty concentration to move SE at rate of 5 mph.
0655 onwards	Enemy btys.	Selected Med btys.		

(b) From 0730 hrs to zero for Phase II arty will engage targets by observation.
F Bty RHA and 104 Regt RHA in support of 2/1 Bn.
2/1 Fd Regt in support of 2/2 Bn.
51 Fd Regt in support of 2/3 Bn.
2/2 Fd Regt in support of 17 Aust Inf Bde.

19. DECEPTION:

At 0530 hrs 2/6 Bn will stage a demonstration against the SW corner of the Southern sector of the perimeter. 2/2 Fd Regt will support this demonstration by engaging the following targets:—

0530 to 0545 hrs.	Posts 4, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 13.	Concentrations of 6 guns on each Post in turn.

Thereafter 2/2 Fd Regt will fire regtl bursts on enemy btys and Posts 22, 24, 25, 26, 27 until 0730 hrs.

20. A Tk PROTECTION:

16 Aust Inf Bde will be responsible for A Tk protection within the perimeter from incl Main Rd BARDIA-CAPUZZO to the LEFT of their objective.

P Bty RHA, less two Tps, will be responsible from excl Post 53 to the WEST.

21. AIR:

208 Sqn RAF under Corps control are providing the following sorties on 3 Jan:—

Tac R—

(a) Three sorties at 0700, 0930 and 1200 hrs.
Area—BARDIA perimeter.
Tasks—
(i) Report posn of own fwd tps.
(ii) Report dispositions of enemy forces within perimeter, with reference to enemy AFVs.

Reports by W/T and message dropping on HQs 6 Aust Div and 16 Aust Inf Bde.

Arty R—

(b) Two sorties at call of CRA 6 Aust Div from 0730 hrs.

ADM

22. Adm Instns will be issued separately.

INTERCOMN

23. HQ 6 Aust Div remains present location.

Adv H.Q. 16 Aust Inf Bde opens on track in assembly area 50903953 0500 hrs 3 Jan and will open a report centre at Post 45 after its capture.

After 2/2 and 2/3 Bns have captured their objectives, Adv Bde HQ will move to Post 40.

Rear HQ 16 Aust Inf Bde opens at Pt 206 50783833 at 0500 hrs.

HQ 17 Aust Inf Bde remains present location.

HQ 19 Aust Inf Bde opens 0500 hrs 3 Jan at Pt 208 50673842 (old HQ 16 Aust Inf Bde).

W/T TENDER:

208 Sqn RAF will send one RAF tender to report to HQ 6 Aust Div by 1400 hrs 2 Jan.

FREQUENCY FOR Tac R—

2750 kcs.

CALL SIGNS—

7 Armd Div XY	16 Aust Inf Bde SS
6 Aust Div SM	Adv HQ WDF LO

POSN FWD INF—

WHITE CROSSES will be displayed at HQs of leading Coys 6 Aust Div when halted to indicate to air posn reached by fwd tps.

LOs—

One Div LO and one LO 19 Aust Inf Bde will be at HQ 16 Aust Inf Bde from 1600 hrs 2 Jan.

16 and 17 Aust Inf Bdes will arrange LOs with each other.

SYNCHRONIZATION—

Reps formations and units will synchronize watches at HQ 6 Aust Div at 2100 hrs 2 Jan.

ACK.

Time of signature: 1600 hrs.

F. H. Berryman,
Colonel,
GS, 6 Aust Div.

Method of Issue: LOs and Sigs.

Distribution	Copy No.
16 Aust Inf Bde	1
17 Aust Inf Bde	2
19 Aust Inf Bde	3

RAA 6 Aust Div	4
RAE 6 Aust Div	5
Sigs 6 Aust Div	6
A Sqn 6 Aust Cav	7
7 RTR	8
WDF	9
7 Armd Div	10
GOC	11
G	12
A	13
Q	14
AASC	15
Med	16
Ord	17
1 Aust Corps	18
File	19-20
War Diary	21-22

NOTE.—PHASE II will be issued separately.

SECRET

6 AUST DIV OO No. 6 (Continued) Copy No. 24
1 Jan, 41.

PHASE II

24. The attack will be resumed at 1130 hrs 3 Jan by 17 Aust Inf Bde, A Sqn 6 Aust Cav (less one VMG Tp), and 7 R Tanks supported by arty.

25. (a) Objectives & SL 2/5 Bn and A Sqn 6 Aust Cav (less one VMG Tp) shown on TRACE E.
(b) A Sqn will protect left of 2/5 Bn and exploit enemy btys from rear after tanks have passed.
(c) 2/5 Bn will send one coy fwd to exploit in rear of left fwd tp, 7 R Tanks.

26. 7 R Tanks. Objectives and SL shown on TRACE F. On completion of tasks 7 R Tanks will rally in area Post 34, 500 yds north of cross rds 5135923, and remain within the perimeter to deal with any tank counter attacks.

27. As attack of 2/5 Bn or 7 R Tanks progresses, 2/7 Bn will enter the perimeter and carry out the tasks shown on TRACE E.

28. Arty.
(a) At 1130 hrs will open on Posts 24 and 25, and then move SE on each post in turn finishing on Posts 17, R 11 and enemy bty 51923898 at 1325 hrs.
12 guns for ten mins and 36 guns for last three mins will fire on each post in turn.
(b) Rate of Adv arty fire—100 yds/3mins.
(c) Enemy btys east of Posts 19 to 24 will be engaged by med arty from 1130 to 1325 hrs.
Fire of med btys will be co-ordinated to move SE with arty fire on Posts.
(d) From 1325 hrs onwards fire by observation.
2/1 Fd Regt in support of 2/5 Bn.
2/2 Fd Regt in support of 2/7 Bn.

29. Air Bombardment.
Enemy btys in centre of Southern sector will be subjected to intermittent air bombing from 0830 to 1130 hrs.

30. 2/2 Bn will support left of 2/5 Bn attack by fire by observation at 1130 hrs.

31. (a) At 1600 hrs an engr party of two sub-secs 2/8 Fd Coy with escort will be prepared to move into BARDIA to seize water and engr installations.

(b) Escort Comd—OC VMG Tp 6 Aust Cav.
Tps—One VMG Tp 6 Aust Cav
One Pl 2/2 Bn.

32. 17 Aust Inf Bde will be responsible for protection of Southern Sector, i.e. from excl main rd BARDIA-CAPUZZO.

33. Protection of 7 R Tanks in rallying area Post 34 during 3 Jan and night 3/4 Jan will be responsibility 16 Aust Inf Bde.

ACK.

Time of Signature: 1900 hrs.
Method of Issue: LOs & Sigs.

F. H. Berryman,
Colonel,
GS 6 Aust Div.

Distribution	Copy No.
16 Aust Inf Bde	1
17 Aust Inf Bde	2
19 Aust Inf Bde	3
RAA 6 Aust Div	4
RAE 6 Aust Div	5
Sigs 6 Aust Div	6
A Sqn 6 Aust Cav	7
7 RTR	8
WDF	9
7 Armd Div	10
GOC	11
G	12
A	13
Q	14
AASC	15
Med	16
Ord	17
1 Aust Corps	18
File	19-20
War Diary	21-22

SECRET
Copy No. 18
1 Jan, 41.

6 AUST DIV OP INSTN No. 4

MOVEMENTS ON D-1 AND NIGHT D-1/D1.

Ref: BARDIA North and South Sheet 1/50,000.

1. Allotment of Tps: The following will come under comd forthwith:—

16 Aust Inf Bde—
A Sqn 6 Aust Cav until Z for Phase II.
One Tp P Bty 3 RHA.
One Coy 1 NF.

17 Aust Inf Bde—
J Bty 3 RHA. One Tp to be kept in res.
1 NF less one Coy.

2. 2/5 Bn on D-1 will move via TRIGH CAPUZZO to squares 508390 and 507390. It will leave TRIGH CAPUZZO at Pt 208 50733863 at 1700 hrs and will be clear of that Pt by 1730 hrs.

3. Marching personnel of 16 Aust Inf Bde moving along GEORGE ST on night D-1/D1 will keep off the track and leave it free for MT.

4. 7 RTR on night D-1/D1 will arrive GEORGE ST at 0220 hrs and will be clear of it by 0400 hrs.

5. Arty: TRIGH CAPUZZO and GEORGE ST will be available for Arty, including amn vehicles, on night D-1/D1, from 1800 to 0220 hrs and from 0400 hrs onwards. Small colns of inf MT will traverse GEORGE ST during these periods. Arty and gun amn vehicles will NOT use KING ST.

6. 16 Aust Inf Bde will be responsible for co-ordinating movement of inf bns and supporting tps, other than arty, North of SIDI AZEIZ Rd.

7. X Bn 19 Aust Inf Bde on day D-1 and night D-1/D1 will move across country and relieve 2/3 Bn. TRIGH CAPUZZO will be crossed about Pt 195 50973837 at 1730 hrs and cleared by 1800 hrs. Relief to be completed by 2100 hrs.

8. Y and Z Bns 19 Aust Inf Bde on D-1 and night D-1/D1 will move across country and occupy the areas vacated by 2/1 and 2/2 Bns respectively.

Bns NOT to pass fwd of 2/2 Bn area about HAGFED UAER 50553807 before 2200 hrs D-1.

Arrangements will be made to ensure that Z Bn does NOT interrupt traffic on TRIGH CAPUZZO and GEORGE ST.

ACK.

R. King Maj
for Colonel,
GS, 6 Aust Div.

Time of Signature: 2200 hrs.
Method of Issue: Sigs.

Distribution	Copy No.
16 Aust Inf Bde	1
17 Aust Inf Bde	2
19 Aust Inf Bde	3
RAA 6 Aust Div	4
RAE 6 Aust Div	5
Sigs 6 Aust Div	6
A Sqn 6 Aust Cav	7
7 RTR	8
WDF	9
GOC	10
G	11
A	12
Q	13
AASC	14
Med	15
Ord	16
Pro	17
File	18-19
War Diary	20-21

SIGNALS FOR COOPERATION BETWEEN TANKS AND INF.—

Tank Flags Signals:

(a) Red, White and Blue flags—friendly tank coming out of action.
(b) Green and White flags—come on infantry.
(c) Red and Yellow flags—tank broken down.
(d) Blue square flag—Bn Comd tank.
(e) Red flag and Red pennant—Adjt's tank.
(f) 2 Yellow pennants—Sqn Comd.
(g) 1 pennant (various colours)—Tp Comd.

Inf Signals to Tanks:

(a) Tin hat on bayonet—Inf wants help.
(b) Two or more tin hats on bayonets, pointed towards objective—indicates point or linear target.
(c) Individual placing himself in front of tank with hand to side of mouth—indicates speech with tank comd required.

APPENDIX 3

ABBREVIATIONS

A—*Assistant.*
A/—*Acting.*
AA—*Anti-aircraft.*
AA&QMG—*Assistant Adjutant and Quartermaster-General.*
ABDACOM—*American, British, Dutch, Australian Command.*
AG—*Adjutant-General.*
AGH—*Australian General Hospital.*
AHQ—*Army Headquarters.*
APM—*Assistant Provost Marshal.*
Armd—*Armoured.*
Arty—*Artillery.*
A-Tk—*Anti-tank.*
AVM—*Air Vice-Marshal.*

Bde—*Brigade.*
BGS—*Brigadier, General Staff.*
BM—*Brigade Major.*
Bn—*Battalion.*
BRA—*Brigadier, Royal Artillery.*
Brig—*Brigadier.*
Bty—*Battery.*

Capt—*Captain.*
Cav—*Cavalry.*
CCS—*Casualty Clearing Station.*
Cdr—*Commander.*
CE—*Chief Engineer.*
CGS—*Chief of the General Staff.*
C-in-C—*Commander-in-Chief.*
Cmdre—*Commodore.*
CO—*Commanding Officer.*
Col—*Colonel.*
Comd—*Command, Commanded, Commander.*
Comdt—*Commandant.*
Coy—*Company.*
Cpl—*Corporal.*
CRA—*Commander, Royal Artillery (of a Division).*
CRE—*Commander, Royal Engineers (of a Division).*

D—*Deputy, Director.*
DAAG—*Deputy Assistant Adjutant-General.*
DADOS—*Deputy Assistant Director of Ordnance Services.*
DDS&T—*Deputy Director of Supply and Transport.*
DGMS—*Director-General of Medical Services.*
Div—*Division.*
DMI—*Director of Military Intelligence.*
DMS—*Director of Medical Services.*
DMT—*Director of Military Training.*
Dvr—*Driver.*

Engrs—*Engineers.*

Fd—*Field.*

Gen—*General.*
Gnr—*Gunner.*
GSO1—*General Staff Officer, Grade 1.*
GHQ—*General Headquarters.*
GOC—*General Officer Commanding.*
Gp—*Group.*

HQ—*Headquarters.*
How—*Howitzer.*

IG—*Inspector-General.*
Ind—*India, Indian.*
Indep—*Independent.*
Inf—*Infantry.*
Int—*Intelligence.*
IO—*Intelligence Officer.*

L-Cpl—*Lance-Corporal.*
LH—*Light Horse.*
LHQ—*Land Headquarters.*
L of C—*Lines of Communication.*
Lt—*Lieutenant.*

MD—*Military District.*
ME—*Middle East.*
MG—*Machine-Gun.*
MGGS—*Major-General, General Staff.*
MGO—*Master-General of the Ordnance.*
Min—*Minister.*

NCO—*Non-Commissioned Officer.*
NG—*New Guinea.*

Ops—*Operations.*
Ord—*Ordnance.*

Pdr—*Pounder.*
Pte—*Private.*

R—*Royal.*
RAP—*Regimental Aid Post.*
RHA—*Royal Horse Artillery.*
Regt—*Regiment.*
Rfct—*Reinforcement.*
RMO—*Regimental Medical Officer.*
RSM—*Regimental Sergeant-Major.*

SC—*Staff Captain.*
Sgt—*Sergeant.*
Spr—*Sapper.*
Sqn—*Squadron.*
S-Sgt—*Staff-Sergeant.*
Svy—*Survey.*
SWPA—*South-West Pacific Area.*

T/ and Temp—*Temporary or Temporarily.*
TAF—*Tactical Air Force.*
Tk—*Tank.*
Tpr—*Trooper.*
Tps—*Troops.*

VDC—*Volunteer Defence Corps.*

WO—*Warrant-Officer.*

APPENDIX 4

A.I.F. COLOUR PATCHES — MAY 1941

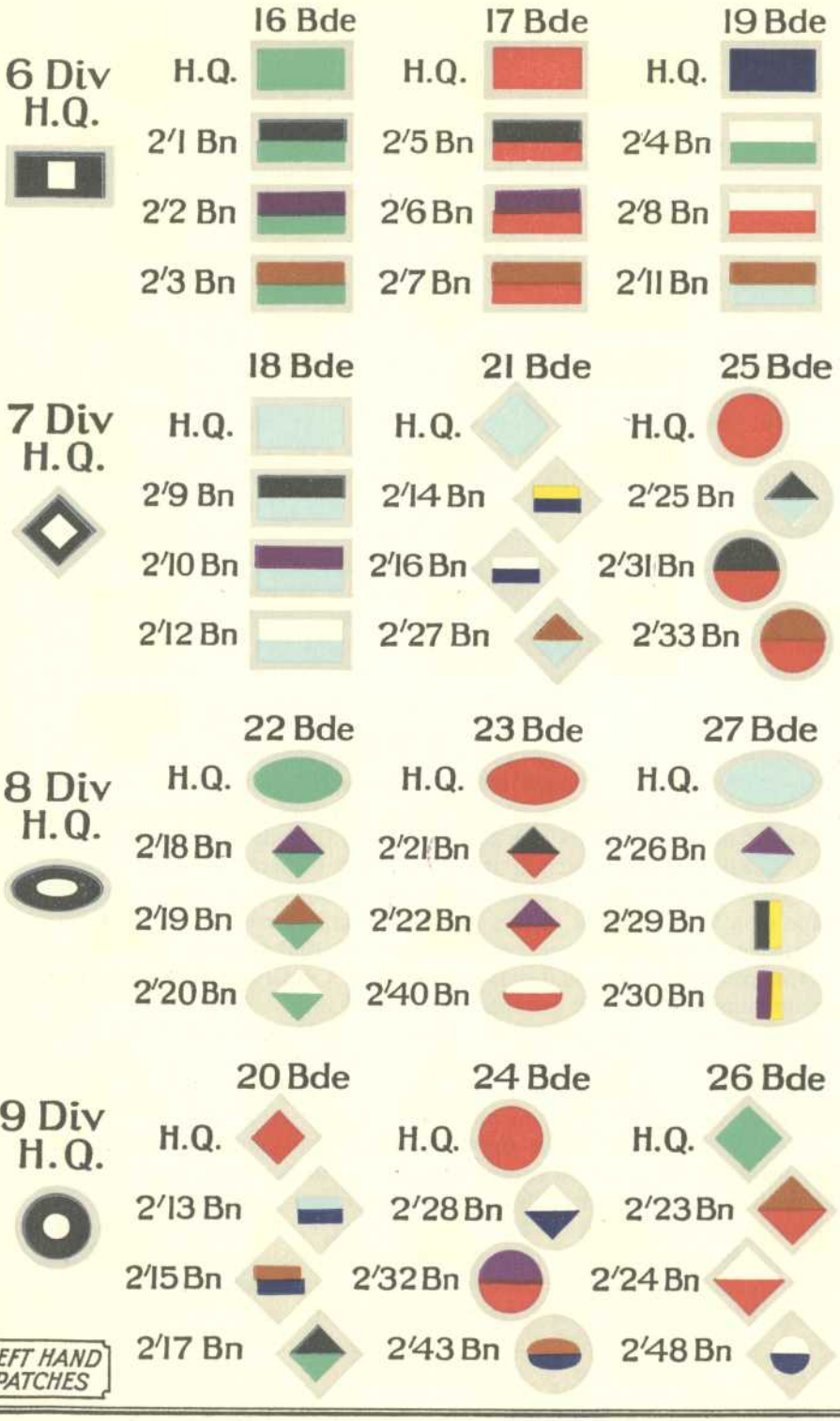
THIS chart attempts to represent the colour patches of the principal corps and divisional units in the A.I.F. at the time when organisation of the divisions and brigades had been stabilised. It would have been beyond its scope to include the colour patches of all units of the Australian Army at all times; and indeed at present no accurate record of them exists.

When the Second A.I.F. was formed the principle governing the allotment of unit colour patches was that the units should wear the patches of corresponding units of the old A.I.F., but on a grey background to distinguish A.I.F. units from militia. The Army asked the Australian War Memorial to provide examples of the colour patches of the old A.I.F., and it did so; but some of the colours were faded or the dyes poor; and to this day there may still be men who maintain that the colour patch of the 2/6th Battalion, for example, was royal blue over red, whereas, if the principle had been followed, it should have been purple over the brigade colour.

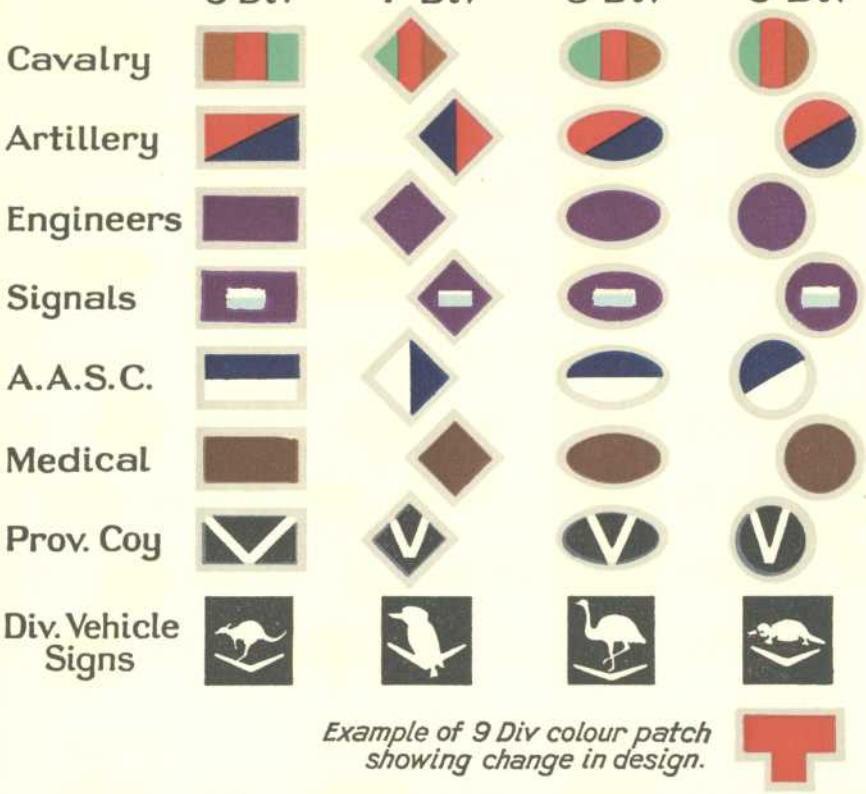
One complication that had to be overcome in the preparation of the drawing was the failure of one of the principal authorities—a tome of some hundreds of pages of line drawings compiled by the Branch of the Master-General of the Ordnance—to distinguish between right and left hand colour patches. Thus these drawings were not helpful where the colours were divided by a line which departed from the horizontal. Another was produced by the formation in England of the 25th Brigade which at the outset chose its own patches and, in the case of the headquarters and the 2/31st and 2/33rd Battalions, wore those patches for over five years—although they were entirely different from the ones laid down in the authority above. (One result of this was that for a period of about two years the 24th and 25th Brigade headquarters units wore identical colour patches; until, in 1942, General Morshead sought and gained approval for a 9th Divisional colour patch which took the shape of a "T", and was in fact intended to commemorate that division's service in Tobruk.) Other complications were the result of differing interpretations by individual unit commanders. Cavalry units, for example, are unanimous that their patches were based on the Royal Tank Corps colours, which are interpreted as "Through mud and blood to the green fields beyond"; according to one cavalry commander acceptance of this principle entailed placing the brown of the colour patch to the front, but according to another, who assumed an advance from rear to front, it entailed placing them in the opposite order. "No gunner worth his salt ever wore his colour patch except with the red to the front" (representing the flash from a gun barrel followed by the blue smoke), declared a 9th Division artillery sergeant—but he could not rember whether the left-hand patch was cut from 2 o'clock to 8 o'clock or 10 o'clock to 4 o'clock.

Wherever doubt was felt about the accuracy of a design opinions were obtained from one or more former members of the unit.

INFANTRY


16 Bde
17 Bde
19 Bde
6 Div H.Q.
H.Q.
2/1 Bn
2/2 Bn
2/3 Bn
2/5 Bn
2/6 Bn
2/7 Bn
2/4 Bn
2/8 Bn
2/11 Bn
18 Bde
21 Bde
25 Bde
7 Div H.Q.
H.Q.
2/9 Bn
2/10 Bn
2/12 Bn
2/14 Bn
2/16 Bn
2/27 Bn
2/25 Bn
2/31 Bn
2/33 Bn
22 Bde
23 Bde
27 Bde
8 Div H.Q.
H.Q.
2/18 Bn
2/19 Bn
2/20 Bn
2/21 Bn
2/22 Bn
2/40 Bn
2/26 Bn
2/29 Bn
2/30 Bn
20 Bde
24 Bde
26 Bde
9 Div H.Q.
H.Q.
2/13 Bn
2/15 Bn
2/17 Bn
2/28 Bn
2/32 Bn
2/43 Bn
2/23 Bn
2/24 Bn
2/48 Bn
LEFT HAND PATCHES

DIVISIONAL UNITS



Example of 9 Div colour patch showing change in design.

CORPS UNITS & OTHERS



(Distinguishing rectangle inset) *(Distinguishing circle inset)* *(Base units distinguished by square inset)*

Hugh W. Groser

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